NOVELS BY

BARONESS ORCZY

Sir Percy Hits Back
The Celestial City
The Honourable Jim
The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel
The Scarlet Pimpernel
The Laughing Cavalier
Leatherface
I Will Repay
The Old Man in the Corner
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The Tangled Skein
By the Gods Beloved
The Emperor's Candlesticks
Unto Cæsar
A Son of the People
Lord Tony's Wife
Flower o' the Lily
His Majesty's Well Beloved
The First Sir Percy
Nicolette A Tale of Old Provence

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
Ltd., London

THE CELESTIAL CITY

BY

THE BARONESS ORCZY

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

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BOOK I *Prologue*

BOOK I

I

It was very cold and very wet; a thin drizzle that was neither rain nor snow, but that partook of the unpleasant qualities of both, defied every overcoat and the stoutest of boots, penetrated to the marrow of every bone, and, incidentally, blurred the ugly outlines of the houses in Shaston Street as well as the tall, grim stone walls against which the man leaned in the intervals of tramping up and down to keep himself warm.

Now and again a passer-by spoke to him:

"Hello, Bill!"

And he, chawing the end of an excellent cigar, would murmur a surly "Hello!" in reply.

An excellent cigar and an expensive one, although he, the man, wore a coat over which age had thrown a greenish hue, trousers that had not seen a tailor's goose for years, a woollen scarf that hid the absence of a collar, and a battered bowler that would have shamed a street musician.

He had been waiting here for over an hour, sometimes tramping up and down, sometimes leaning against the wall, ever since eight o'clock. She had let him know that it would be eight o'clock, but it was past nine now. The shops in Shaston Street were taking down their shutters, preparing for the business of the day. Through the frosty

mist one or two lights blinked like lazy eyes just wakened from sleep.

Those that hailed the man as they passed, did not stop to make conversation, though one of them did supplement the "Hello, Bill!" with a sympathetic query: "Been here long?" to which the man vouchsafed no reply. It was pretty obvious that he had been here long, for his coat, the one-time velvet collar of which was turned up to his ears, was covered all over with moisture that glistened in the grey morning light like myriads of minute stars.

It was nearly half-past nine before the big wooden doors swung open. The two bobbies at the gate did no more than glance up and hoist their massive chests by inserting their thumbs more firmly into their belts. From where the man stood he couldn't see the gates, nor could he hear the heavy doors swinging on their well-oiled hinges, but some mysterious instinct warned him that they were now open and that she would come in a minute or two.

He threw away the stump of his cigar and turned back the collar of his coat. He even set his battered hat at a more jaunty angle, and finally passed his hand meditatively over his shaggy beard.

The next moment she came out, dressed as he had last seen her in that neat navy-blue coat and skirt, the thin stockings and patent shoes and the smart little hat that made her look just like a lady. She carried the small suit-case which he had given her the day she got engaged to Jim.

The two bobbies hardly looked at her. Silly

fools! not often did they see such a pretty sight as she presented—even now.

Turning out of the gate, she stopped on the pavement and looked to right and left. Presently she saw the man through the mist and the rain and the cold, and, just for a second, her little face lit up. It had been so very sullen, so rebellious before; and, sure enough, the light faded out of it again in a moment, and left it frowning, with drooping mouth and lips set tightly together.

"Hello, kid!" the man said with a vague attempt at cheerfulness

"Hello, father!" she gave answer, and then added with the ghost of a smile: "I did not know you with that beard."

"No?" he rejoined simply.

Silently they walked on, side by side, leaving those awful walls towering behind them Just as the girl was stepping off the pavement before crossing Manthorpe Place, she turned and gave them a last look. An imperceptible shudder went through her slim body.

"Don't look at 'em, kid," the man said quietly. "It's all over now, and we'll forget all about 'em"

She gave a dry little laugh.

"Easy for you," she murmured, "to forget all about 'em."

"We'll go to London or somewhere," the man went on with a vague gesture of his lean, brown hand "There's plenty of money now, you know. Quite safe."

They didn't speak for some time after that, just walked on, she carrying her suit-case, and he walking with his hands in the pockets of his

overcoat, not offering to carry the case for her, though it was obviously heavy and awkward, but, nevertheless, very attentive and watchful over her at the crossings.

When they came to the bridge, she exclaimed:

"Hello! don't we pay our penny to go over the bridge?"

"No!" the man replied; "they took off the toll last year. You didn't know, did yer?"

"No," she replied, "I didn't know."

"And you remember Reeson's flour-mill? He's had to shift his works, outside the city boundary. The smoke from his chimneys was rotting some of the stonework of the minster. He fought the corporation over it, tooth and nail. But he's had to go. People say it's cost him a mint of money, but my belief is that he got compensation and didn't lose a penny by the transaction."

He went on in the same strain for some time, but, obviously, the girl was not listening. Her thoughts were elsewhere, and he, equally obviously, was only talking for the sake of bridging over these awkward moments, the first they had spent alone together since goodness knows when. She had paused on the bridge and was gazing, silent and absorbed, on the old familiar picture: the grey, sluggish river, the city walls, the dull, red-brick buildings of St. Peter's schools, half veiled in the drooping branches of secular willows; and farther on the towers of the minster, encased in a network of scaffolding, set up to protect them against the depredations of modern commercialism.

"Much about the same, ain't it, kid?"

She turned away from the contemplation of the old city and replied with a sigh:

"Yes, much about the same."

Five minutes later they were over the bridge, in the unfashionable quarter of Yeominster. Row upon row of pale, dim-coloured brickwork broken at regular intervals by flights of stone steps leading to the front doors and flanked by lines of painted iron railings, represented the contributions made by nineteenth-century architecture towards the aggrandisement of the mediæval city.

"Here we are," the man said with an obvious sigh of relief as he came to a halt outside one of these ugly structures, and, taking the five stone steps at a bound, he fumbled for his latchkey and soon had the front door invitingly open. He entered the house, closely followed by the girl When the door fell to behind them, the narrow hall and passage were pitch dark; ahead the steep staircase, partly covered by a tattered oil-cloth, showed vaguely in the dim light that came slanting from a window above. From one of the upper floors came a confused sound made up of intermittent swearing, an occasional fretful appeal, some shuffling and banging, and the monotonous cry of a child

"We haven't been able to get rid of those people on the third floor yet," the man remarked curtly. "Such a nuisance they are! Their brat is always sick"

The girl followed him along the passage and down the stairs that led to the basement. From below, too, came a vague murmur of voices, and presently the man threw open a door. A loud

"Hello!" uttered by half a dozen lusty throats greeted the arrival of the pair. The girl blinked her eyes, trying to pierce the haze of tobacco smoke that hung like a curtain between her and the number of hands stretched out to greet her. A chair was pushed forward for her.

She sat down, half-dazed by the heat of the atmosphere, the rough greetings, the familiar sounds and smells of the old place; a soft colour crept into her wan cheeks and a glimmer of excitement came into her eyes.

"Bless my soul," said one man, "I do believe she's grown."

This made her laugh; she took off her hat with a quick gesture that had something of defiance in it, and her small head appeared with its crop of golden hair cut so close that for a moment she seemed in her neat tailor-made more like a boy than a girl. Her father gave a curt laugh.

"It's all the fashion in London now," he said, "for ladies to cut their hair. Ain't it, mates?"

"It'll soon grow," someone remarked sententiously.

Further discussion on the subject was interrupted by the entrance of a very large, slatternly-looking woman carrying a tray of tea-things, which she set upon the table in the middle of the room She showed neither surprise nor pleasure at seeing the girl, who gave her a curt "Hello, Mrs Mason," as she put the tray down.

"I've made you a bit o' toast," the woman remarked drily, "and I thought you could eat an egg."

After which she waddled out of the room.

Youth and health asserted themselves then and there. The arrival of Mrs. Mason, the tea-tray, the hot buttered toast and fresh egg acted like a thaw on the girl's frozen senses. She fell to with relish and vigour, all the men watching her eat as if the sight of her enjoying her tea was the one sight they had been longing for. At one moment she looked up and caught her father's eyes fixed upon her.

"Glad to be back?" he asked somewhat wistfully, as he came round to her and stood close to her chair.

She didn't reply in so many words, but with a graceful kittenish movement she leaned over and pressed her cheek against his coat-sleeve, whilst a soft look stole into her eyes.

Sentiment being apparently a reprehensible display in social intercourse, several men at once cleared their throats, expectorated on the dusty floor, wiped their mouths with the backs of their hands, and gave sundry other signs of complete indifference. Then one of them suddenly remarked:

"You did know the war was over, didn't you, kid?"

She nodded.

"Yes, we knew that," she said "Someone sent a lot of oranges to celebrate the occasion, and there was suet pudding one day. November, wasn't it?"

They all nodded in reply, and after a pause she went on:

"All the boys come home yet?"

"Most of 'em," someone said. And then

suddenly they were all silent. One or two enquiring glances were shot at Bill, who mutely shook his head. Once more there was universal clearing of throats, and presently a call for Mrs. Mason. The girl had been silent for a minute or so; then she said quietly, all at once:

"You needn't tell me: I know."

They understood and said nothing, and after another second she added:

"He was killed?"

Her father nodded.

"A week before the armistice," he said. And one or two of the others also nodded their heads in a sage manner and said slowly:

"Yes, a week before the armistice. That's when it was"

With this the incident was closed. The girl went on slowly sipping her tea. The men started a discussion on the subject of some new police regulations that seemed greatly to excite them, but did not interest her in the least. And presently she felt an immense lassitude, a longing for her own comfy bed, with the spring mattress and the light, warm quilt. Her father caught her out yawning

"Would you like to go upstairs, kid?" he asked.

"Yes, I would," she replied "I feel as if I could sleep on and off for hours and hours"

She rose and clung to his arm.

"S'long everybody," Bill said, giving his friends a comprehensive nod "See you to-night as usual. Same place."

They all said "S'long" and at once resumed

their discussion on the new police regulations, whilst Bill picked up the girl's suit-case and led her out of the room.

II

The evening meeting took place in a private room at the "Bishop's Apron" in Milsom Street. When Bill arrived, his friends were already there.

"Well, how's the kid?" one of them asked as soon as Bill had thrown down his hat and joined them at the table. He was tall, with sandy hair sprinkled with grey, clean-shaved crimson face, a snub nose, and very round pale blue eyes.

"Pretty fair," Bill replied curtly.

"She seemed kind of quiet this morning," another man remarked

Before Bill spoke again, he poured himself out a mugful of ale from the huge jug that stood in the centre of the table, then having carefully wiped his mouth with the back of his hand he said slowly:

"Well, what can you expect? We did do the dirty on her, didn't we?"

"It couldn't be helped," the sandy-haired giant retorted

"Any one of us," someone added, "would have got fourteen years. What's eighteen months to a kid her age?"

"And you yourself, Bill——"

Bill brought down the palm of his hand with a bang upon the table.

"I didn't say one way or the other, did I? Laddie said the kid seemed quiet. She was not likely to fall on our necks all at once, was she? after eighteen months she's had—and Jim gone

without her seeing him again. And one thing and another. Now, was she?" he went on, and cast a kind of defiant glance all round at the familiar faces before him.

"I never thought she cared much about Jim," one man remarked.

"That's not the point," Bill retorted—"just part and parcel of the same thing. She'll get over it presently, of course, but just now she feels a bit hipped, and that's all about it."

There was silence for a moment or two after that, and then one man, who seemed different from the rest of the party by reason of his tously brown hair and beard, his narrow almond-shaped eyes and parchment-coloured skin that gave him a distinctly foreign look, leaned forward, his arms on the table, and addressed the company in general

"What exactly happened about the girl?" he asked. "I never knew really."

At first nobody seemed inclined to embark on the story. "You tell him, Bill," someone suggested.

"Not me," Bill rejoined "I want bygones to be bygones. I'd much rather not talk about it any more."

But the others insisted.

"It's only fair Paul should know," one of them said.

"It'd best come from you," added another.

And the one they called Paul clinched the matter with a persuasive:

"Come on, Bill."

"It was over that affair at Deansthorpe close

by here," the sandy-haired man remarked, by way of setting the ball rolling.

"Well!" Bill broke in with a loud oath, "if Kilts is going to tell the story——"

"No, no, Bill; you go on!" was the universal comment in response.

"Well, then," Bill resumed after a slight pause, "it was over that business at Deansthorpe, as Kilts says. We thought we were safe, because the people were all abroad, and we didn't know that that swine of a caretaker was going to turn traitor. It wasn't him either; it was his wife. He told her and she gave us away to the police. Anyway, we had come prepared for anything, you understand? The kid was with us, for she can climb like a cat and there's no one like her for getting through a bit of an opening that you'd think couldn't accommodate a mouse. Jim was along too; they'd called themselves engaged since the March previous and we had posted him down in the street below to give us warning in case of trouble coming. He was to give one whistle for 'look out!' two for 'get away quick!' and three for 'run for your lives!'"

Like a true raconteur, Bill paused in his story in order to lubricate his throat. No one spoke, no one interrupted: they all sat round pulling away at their pipes or their cigars, for there was a box of choice Havanas upon the rough deal table and on a battered tin tray there was a bottle of green Chartreuse, obviously of the genuine, very expensive kind.

"We were up on the second floor," Bill went on after a while, "and we had got the whole of the

swag out of the safe. I must tell you that we'd been at work over three hours then; we had the pearls, and the rest of the jewellery, and a thousand or two in notes, and what's more we'd got what we came for, all the letters from the German agent over in Holland which went to prove that Simeon Goldstein was doing a grand trade in the matter of selling information to the Germans. We reckoned on touching him for at least a hundred thousand for those letters, and we did too ultimately, didn't we, mates?"

They all solemnly nodded assent.

The one they called Paul sat listening with his almond-shaped eyes fixed upon the speaker, whose every word evidently sank into his receptive brain

"Laddie here put us up to the job about those letters," Bill resumed, and then added with a touch of grim humour: "It was that information that gave him the entrée into our exclusive circle. He's been one of us ever since, and it was the least we could do, to admit him into partnership just as we admitted you, Paul, for the information you gave us in the autumn. Laddie had been valet to old Goldstein, and had found out about the letters. Then one day he had the good fortune to meet me, we became pals, and there you are! Laddie is a rich man now, ain't you, Laddie? Well, to resume We'd got our swag comfortably tucked away, when we heard Jim's whistle—once, twice—three times! It meant 'fly for your lives' The kid—she's a wonderful girl, I tell yer—peeps out of the window, and sees the cops all down below; and whilst we all say,

'What's to be done?' she has already got a plan ready in her head. 'Slip some of the goods into my pockets, Dad,' she says to me. Just then that fool Spinks—the caretaker of the place, you understand—comes running in like a scared hen. You should have seen the kid how she turned on him. 'While Jim and me have a little conversation with the police,' she says to him, 'you see that Dad and the others get away by the back door. If you don't,' she says, 'or if they get caught, you are a dead man to-morrow.' And he could see that she meant it too. I guessed, of course, what she meant to do, and so did the others as I say, and we did the dirty on her—that is, we let her get copped and saved ourselves. She just climbed out of the window and let herself down by the gutter, and fell straight into the arms of half a dozen police, who already had got Jim. She screamed and she fought like a little cat, all in order to give us time to get away."

"She is a splendid girl, and no mistake," Paul remarked with quiet enthusiasm.

"And of course they found some swag on her," Bill continued, "and she got eighteen months for burglary and housebreaking. She wouldn't have got so much only it wasn't a first conviction, see? She had spent six months in a reformatory when she was fourteen, for helping me in a little bit of business, and then another year when she was sixteen But all the same, if any of us had been caught that time, each with an automatic in our hip pocket, it would have been fourteen years for us Jim was collared for the army and got killed a month later, and the kid got eighteen

months; but, after all, what's that in life when you are young?"

"And we shouldn't have had the letters," one of the others remarked sententiously.

"Oh! aye! the letters!" Kilts rejoined with a light laugh. "They were the principal swag, and we'd got them all right."

"We sold them to Sir Simeon Goldstein for one hundred thousand pounds, and cheap at the price. He daren't prosecute, and declared that the swag which was found in the kid's pockets was all that was stolen from him that night. He never said anything about the safe having been tampered with. Of course not; on the contrary, he was in a mortal funk that the police should get one of us before he had completed the transaction about the letters and paid over the money, which he had to do bit by bit, so as not to arouse his banker's suspicions. And even now we've kept one letter back in case he should think of doing the dirty on us. And we've got the money," Bill concluded, once more striking the table with the palm of his hand, so that glasses and mugs rattled in chorus, "ten thousand solid pounds each of us, six men, and forty thousand I've got put by for the kid, and jolly well she deserves it, too. But for her, where would we all be, I'd like to know?"

He took a long drink: the story had been told, and Paul still hung, quietly enthusiastic, upon his lips. The others continued to smoke in silence; each appeared buried in his own thoughts.

"What's the girl doing now?" Paul asked after a while.

"I left her," Bill replied, "just playing with

her jewellery. I got her some pearls, you know, and diamond ear-rings from that place in Bond Street. None of you mates wanted to join me in that game; but I made a good haul all the same. I wanted the kid to have some nice things when she came out; and women love that sort of thing. She hardly looked at the draft I gave her for forty thousand quid."

Paul gave a prolonged whistle.

"Forty thousand!" he exclaimed. "Jerusalem!"

"Price of eighteen months in quod," Bill retorted curtly, "and keeping us out of it. Cheap, I call it."

"And so do I," one of the others asserted emphatically.

Apparently it was the general opinion. But for the kid they could not have got that pretty little bit of blackmail going with Sir Simeon Goldstein. Most of them would be doing their fourteen years' penal servitude instead. Blackmailers, forgers, thieves—potential murderers probably—but they weren't going to do the dirty on the kid over the money. (Try to explain that to your own satisfaction, Messrs. Psycho-Analysts!)

The conversation now drifted away from the main subject. Only Paul remained thoughtful. He had never come across anything of the sort in all his life. But the others soon broke in on his meditations. He was a new recruit admitted into this little army of international, not altogether uneducated criminals by reason of his connection with some of those wealthy Russians who

had managed to get away from their country with most of their valuables. Plans, therefore, had to be made whereby Paul's knowledge and connections could most profitably be utilised. Thus the evening wore on

Bill was the first to break up the party.

"I was up early this morning," he remarked with a grin, "and want to go bye-byes"

It was about a quarter of an hour before closing time. Arrangements were made for meeting the next day, after which Bill made his way back to his home in Pierson Street where he might still have the chance of giving the kid a good-night kiss before she went to sleep. Bill gave a sudden sigh of content. It was nice having the kid home again. He had no idea how he would miss her, when she went.

The others sat on smoking until the barman came to warn them that he was putting up the shutters.

"Closing time, gentlemen"

They all turned out into the street and walked away together for a little distance until they felt no longer disturbed by either the lights of the "Bishop's Apron" or by that of one of the rare street-lamps. In the gloom they came to a halt, continued an interrupted discussion for a minute or two, and were just nodding curt "good-nights" to one another, when Kilts suddenly exclaimed:

"Hello! here's Bill back again!"

"What on earth——?" ejaculated one of the others.

No wonder the rest of the sentence died un-

uttered in his throat. Bill came running down the street, hatless, his arms waving, his loose hair flying about his face. He fell like a dead weight against Kilts, who had to stand firm, or he would have fallen under the impact and the pair of them would have rolled over in the mud.

"My God!" Bill cried hoarsely. "The kid!" A shower of anxious queries and a vigorous shaking from Kilts brought him out of his state of semi-consciousness.

"She's gone!"

"Gone?" Kilts exclaimed. "Nonsense!"

"I tell you she's gone," Bill retorted with a rough oath. "Left me a letter to say she'd gone."

With a hand that shook like a tree in a gale, he fumbled in his pocket and brought out a crumpled scrap of paper.

"Let's see it," Paul said, and took the paper out of Bill's trembling hand.

"Not here; come to my place," Bill murmured, suddenly sobered at sight of a passer-by who had eyed the group with an obvious air of suspicion. The advice was sound. They did not look the sort of men whom any bobby would pass unconcernedly by, and though this quarter of Yeominster is lonely enough and dark enough to suit any night-bird, there were occasional belated pedestrians who might prove in the way, as well as a point policeman not two hundred yards away. Anyway, they all decided to follow Bill's advice and to adjourn to his place, there to hear the details of this unexpected adventure. They parted company and, each going his own way, they met again ten minutes later in the basement of the house

in Pierson Street where they had so heartily welcomed the kid that very morning.

As soon as they were all assembled, Bill spread the paper in front of him on the table and with his moist palm smoothed out its creases.

"This is what she says," he began; then he read out the contents of the letter.

> "I am going away for a bit, father. I feel I couldn't stand the life here Not just yet I want to get out of it all, be free to lead my own life for a while. Don't try to find me. If you leave me quite alone I'll come back to you some day—probably very soon, as I dare say I shall get as sick of my new life as I am of the old. But if you try to get me back before I am ready for you, then I'll never come. So leave me alone, and like Bo-Peep's sheep I'll come home all right. I am,
>
> "Yr dutiful and loving daughter"

"There now," Bill said when he had finished reading, "what do you think of that?"

"Has she got any money?" queried the practical Kilts

"She's got the draft, hasn't she?" Bill retorted curtly.

"Draft?" put in Paul with a slight uplift of his straight dark brows

"On a banker in Amsterdam," Bill replied—"forty thousand pounds I gave it her to-day, and the pearls and the diamonds She took away the lot"

"You could wire to the bank in Amsterdam to

stop payment of the draft until you come. She'd have to wait then."

"Yes," nodded one or two of the others, "you could do that."

"I could," Bill remarked curtly. Slowly, deliberately he smoothed and folded the fateful letter and slipped it into his breast pocket. Then only he said quietly: "But I won't."

"You won't?" Paul exclaimed. "But surely you want her back?"

"I do. God knows I do. But I won't do the dirty on her again. Not about the money. If the kid wants to have her fling with it, let her. She'll come home one day, when she's sick of it all. But let her have her fling We've done the dirty on her once, I won't do it again. She'll be all right, and one day, perhaps, she'll come home."

In this part of Russia the winter comes along unheralded. Three days ago at the Koursk races the ladies in the stands had to hold up their parasols to shield themselves against the hot sun; to-day it was snowing. It had been snowing for the past twenty-four hours The winter had suddenly set in with a blizzard, and now in the bridle-paths the snow lay a quarter of a metre thick, and in the fields the maize bent under its heavy crystal load. In the pope's garden the crimson zinnias, still in bloom, held each a little pointed

hillock of snow, so that they looked like rows of cherry tarts capped with a mound of whipped cream.

It was long past midnight, and the snow still fell, although the weather-wise were prophesying that there would come a thaw before the real winter finally settled down. In the small village isba, doors and windows were hermetically closed, the huge tiled stove in one corner of the low-raftered room gave out an intense, almost overpowering heat. The wooden floor, innocent of covering, exhaled an odour of ill-kept stables and of stale grease. From the rafters hung bunches of orange-coloured maize, the only vivid note in the drab harmony of blacks and greys, just a compound of half a century of smoke and dirt. It was impossible to see through the small windows—not more than a foot square, either of them—what went on outside But indoors it was cheery enough Drab and primitive as was the whole aspect of the place, it was lighted by an electric lamp which hung from the ceiling just above the square centre table fashioned of solid, dark pine, on the smooth top of which numberless past libations had left patterns of sticky rings.

Round the table half a dozen men sat smoking and drinking silvorium. Four of them were engaged in a game of Tarok The fumes of black tobacco and pungent spirit, mingled with the odour of perspiring humanity, hung like a pall between the rafters and the shaggy heads of these men. The noise in the room was at times deafening. The four Tarok players invariably all talked at once, and when they did not happen to have any-

thing to say, they either swore lustily at the caprices of Chance, or else cleared their throats and expectorated with a sound like the grinding of an ungreased wheel upon its axle.

These four men had the strong facial characteristics of the Semitic race. Three of them, in fact, wore the long black gabardine buttoned from chin to ankle, and greasy at the shoulders, the skull-cap, and the ringlets in front of the ears, the distinctive wear of the Israelites in this part of Europe. The other, whose features were no less strongly marked, wore Western clothes of black broadcloth that showed numerous marks of wear and dirt. He appeared to be a man of wealth and of authority among his companions; he had on an old-fashioned, heavy gold watch-chain and a ring on his finger set with a huge solitaire diamond; he was chawing the fag-end of an excellent cigar, and he seemed to be the only man in the room who could command silence when he chose, and this he did now and then by bringing the palm of his hand down with a crash on the table.

Of the other two occupants of the isba, one, dressed in a rough tweed suit, his trousers tucked into huge leather boots, had upon his face and all about him that pronounced Slav type which approaches the Mongol He was slight of build but looked wiry and even powerful; his skin was of a yellow parchment-like colour; his high cheek-bones looked like polished ivory; his eyes were shrewd, light brown in colour and almond-shaped. But for the long oval shape of his face and the tously pale brown of his hair, he might have been

taken for an Asiatic. He talked little, and there were an endless number of cigarette ends on a metal tray before him. His coarse, spatulated fingers were stained with nicotine, and bits of stale tobacco and of ash had settled in his sparse moustache and beard.

The sixth man, on the other hand, was obviously a foreigner. For one thing, when he did talk, he did not raise his voice to a screech like the others, nor did he expectorate or noisily clear his throat. He, too, was dressed in a rough tweed suit, which though travel-stained looked not only as if it had known better days, but also as if it had recently been in contact with a clothes-brush; his chin and upper lip were shaved, his hair tidy, even his hands looked as if they had recently been washed. Amongst these loose-limbed Israelites he looked a regular giant, powerful of build, with fists that looked as if they could fell an ox. His hair was of a rich sandy colour slightly tinged with grey, his face was florid, and his eyes full and blue. He, too, was smoking an excellent Havana whilst watching the game of Tarok—which obviously he did not understand—with a mixture of unwilling interest and thinly veiled contempt.

"Wait! wait!" the player in the broadcloth exclaimed at one moment with an excited flourish of the arm. "I win this Pagat Ultimo—a wonderful Pagat Ultimo—and then I tell you what I think of the whole affair."

He spoke German with that peculiar lisp characteristic of his race and which always sounds to foreign ears like an expression of mock

humility. Now he rapped his cards down on the table one by one.

"Tarok!" he shouted in a stentorian voice that caused the rafters to shake and the electric pendant to quiver above his head. "Can you beat the twelve, Aaron Mosenthal? No? Then the eight? No? The seven, and the four? No one any more Tarok, and here comes the little Pagat, and I get twenty for tricks and fifty for the Ultimo! Now, Mr. Kilts," he concluded, turning a triumphant, perspiring face to the foreigner, "what do you think of that? Have you ever seen a better-played Ultimo in your life?"

"I can't say I have," the stranger replied in moderately fluent German that had a distinctly North-country—not to say Scottish—intonation in the pronunciation of some of the consonants; "but then I don't understand your silly game. We don't play it in my country."

"No," one of the players retorted with a loud laugh, "but you will one day. Why, you have just started to play Mah-Jongg, which the Chinese gave up as old-fashioned two hundred years ago."

This sally was evidently considered to be very witty, for it was greeted with loud guffaws; one man nearly rolled off his chair, laughing. The man in authority slapped the foreigner familiarly on the back, which was a great condescension, as he was a great man, was Peter Abramovitch Stanko, justice of the peace and people's commissary for the district of Ostolga in the province of Koursk.

The perpetrator of the joke, delighted with his

success, whisked an exceedingly dirty, bright-coloured handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his streaming forehead. The ringlets in front of his ears were ginger-coloured, as were the wisps of lank hair that protruded from beneath his skull-cap. His eyes were the colour of burnt sienna, innocent of eyelashes, and his nose, sharp and pointed above a narrow, receding jaw, gave his whole face a ludicrous resemblance to a dachshund.

Commissary Peter Abramovitch Stanko gazed with unconcealed triumph on the faces of his opponents, who were taking their defeat with a great fund of philosophy and were already engaged in counting out some greasy paper money, which they then pushed across the table toward the winner. There ensued a hullabaloo on the merits and demerits of the Ultimo, and on the tactics that should have been followed in order to avert the catastrophe. The winner shouted louder than the rest; in the intervals of mopping his forehead he demonstrated how he would have defeated any combination set up against him. The babel of raucous voices, in which the man with the almond-shaped eyes took his full share, once more became deafening; alone the foreigner took no part in the discussion: he sat in silence smoking his excellent Havana, the fumes of which were a sweet and welcome odour in this reeking hovel Anon he drew his watch out of his pocket, and when he had caught the eye of the man in the broadcloth, he tapped the watch significantly with his forefinger, whereupon the other stopped arguing and shouting and banged the table with

his fist, causing the mugs of silvorium to jump and to spill their contents.

"Hold your jaws now, all of you," he shouted at the top of his stentorian voice, "and put the cards away. Mr. Kilts and Sergine are going by the train at five o'clock; it is past two already. So if you have any serious questions to ask, now is the time to do it; but every time Mr. Kilts begins to talk business, you all make such a noise, he can't hear himself speak."

"You speak good, Peter Abramovitch," the red-haired Jew said sententiously. "Let us talk a bit now, if you like. I see you don't want to play any more," he added rather spitefully, as he pushed the cards together into a heap; "you have won."

And as the others shrugged their shoulders, obviously resigned to defeat, he went on airily. "You can give us our revanche to-morrow——"

"Did I not tell you to hold your jaw, Jakob Grossman?" Peter Abramovitch broke in sternly. "If I don't have silence until Mr. Kilts has told us about the business, I send you all packing, and the affair is finished as far as you are concerned Is that clear?"

Apparently it was. The other players looked shamefaced. One or two of them muttered something under their breath; but within a minute or two silence reigned in the room.

"Now, Mr. Kilts," Peter Abramovitch said pompously, "you speak"

"What do you want me to say?" the man they called Kilts retorted.

"Well, you see," the other condescended to

explain, "the comrades here don't know much about the business. I shouldn't have told them anything," he went on naïvely, "only we shall want their help—if the thing is going to be successful."

"I don't see how it can help being successful," Kilts rejoined with a dry laugh. "But you may be sure that my friends and I wouldn't have troubled about you fellows either, if we could have carried on without you."

"But you couldn't," retorted Peter Abramovitch complacently. "I am commissary of this district; without my visa no one can come in or out of here, and as the Bobrinsky belong to my district as you say——"

"It would be better," here interposed the red-haired Jew drily, "if Mr. Kilts could tell us first just how things stand. Then we can judge—not?" And he glanced round for approval at his companions.

"Jakob Grossman is right," one of them said. "I for one know nothing. All I was told was that——"

"Never mind what you were told, Aaron Mosenthal," Peter Abramovitch broke in impatiently; "let comrade Kilts have his say. You begin at the beginning, Mr. Kilts," he continued, addressing the Britisher, "then there is no dispute—no argument—what?"

"All right," the other assented. "And in the devil's name let me speak without interruption." He paused a moment and leaning his arms over the table, his cigar between his fingers, he cast a comprehensive glance upon the eager faces before

him. "As far as me and my mates are concerned," he then resumed, "the matter stands like this One of us is a floor-waiter in an hotel in London: he has sharp ears; he is a Swiss by birth, but speaks several languages fluently. One day he took a tea-tray up to a visitor in the hotel whose name is Princess Bobrinsky——"

"Bobrinsky!" ejaculated Grossman, unable to restrain his excitement. "Oh! but the Bobrinskys——"

"Didn't I say you were not to interrupt?" Peter Abramovitch shouted at the top of his voice. "Do you want me to throw up the business, or do you not?"

"So, so, Peter Abramovitch," the other retorted meekly, "do not lose your temper. Are we not all listening?"

"Go on, comrade," Peter Abramovitch rejoined, addressing the Scot, who, with the stolidity of his race, had calmly waited until the interruptions had subsided into a repressed murmur. Then only did he go on.

"This Princess Bobrinsky," he said, "had a friend with her. They were talking English, but Rudolph—that's our mate, the waiter—caught a word or two that made him prick his ears, not only while he was in the room, but when he had got the other side of the door. He gathered from the conversation that Prince Bobrinsky has been reported dead since the Wrangel retreat to Odessa——"

"Yes! I know," Grossman once more broke in with a gasp of excitement, but relapsed at once into a kind of agitated silence under the stern

eye of Peter Abramovitch, whilst the Scotchman continued:

"Rudolf also learned that at one time the Bobrinskys were very rich, and that among other things they had a quantity of jewellery which was of enormous value. The Princess Bobrinsky was talking about this to her friend, and said that before her husband joined Wrangel's army he had put these jewels into a safe place which, now that he was dead, was known only to herself."

But at this point not even Peter Abramovitch's authority was strong enough to quell the tumult that ensued. Apparently every one of those present knew something about the Bobrinsky valuables and each wanted to put in a word telling what he knew. Grossman, of course, was to the fore. He was landlord of the isba; he sold silvorium to every man and heard all the gossip within five versts of the place. What he didn't know of the affairs of his neighbours was not worth a kick on the shins. But he was quite modest about his knowledge; with a condescending wave of the arm he pointed to the yellow-faced Russian, who, up to now, though he had talked at times as much and as loudly as the rest, had seemed to be more an observer of events than an active participant in the discussions.

"Tell them, Paul Alexandrovitch," Grossman said sententiously. "You know!" And he added comprehensively to the rest of the assembly:

"Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine here knows all about the Bobrinsky emeralds He was a menial for a long time in the household—a secretary or something—and if our wonderful revolution

hadn't broken out when it did, why, those emeralds would have been ours before now. Eh! comrade Paul?"

Paul Sergine shrugged his shoulders; perhaps he was not altogether prepared to say that. As for the emeralds—well! he certainly knew all about them. "I have seen them," he said, "dozens of times. The old Bobrinsky woman—the mother of the present man—used to put 'em on when she went to Court. Besides, they were famous all over Russia."

"Sergine is right," Peter Abramovitch explained to the Scotchman "Those emeralds were spoken of with as much awe as the diamonds of the Queen of England. I have seen them myself. I was deputy administrator to the Bobrinskys at one time, and I know that their family jewels were insured for something like eight million roubles—that would be about eight hundred thousand pounds of your money in those days"

"Anyhow, I gather that they are worth getting," the Scotchman rejoined with a dry laugh "My mates and I found that out at once They sent me out here because I could speak German. I even know a word or two of Russian, and of course our friend Sergine looked after me, so I've got on quite well so far. When Rudolf came to us with the tale, we got at once in touch with Paul, who's got a job with the Russian grain commission in London, and Paul knew the ropes all right enough, didn't you, mate? He thought of you at once, Mr Peter Abramovitch. 'Peter Abramovitch is the man for you,' he said at once Great man, Paul—ain't you, mate? He knows the ropes;

he'll tell you what me and my mates want you to do, and if you do it—why, there you are," he concluded, speaking the last three words in his native tongue, because he felt that no German phrase would render the full force of this argument.

"There you are!" It meant: "We in England have set this thing going. It is for you to help us do the rest."

Strangely enough, the Scotchman's tones, if not the exact words, had set them thinking. There they were! no question about that. But the fact had not started one of those tumultuous discussions when each man strove to shout the other down. No! They were all silent now. Brooding. Thinking of those emeralds and marvelling what each individual man would make out of the affair. And what, anyway, this affair was going to be. It sounded fairly simple and feasible, but——

All the same, they were glad that Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine was in it. Paul was one of themselves. One never knew with those foreigners—but Paul was all right Paul would see that his compatriots didn't get cheated. Oh yes, Paul was all right. Mosenthal, for instance, knew him intimately.

"How should we not know one another, eh, Paul?" he said genially. "You and I was in gaol together in '15, you remember, because we ran away before the Austrians at Dorna Watra. You remember?"

Paul nodded genially in return. He remembered perfectly. The army was fighting like mad. They had no ammunition; what they had was

worthless, supplied by a venal contractor who was a great man in Moscow since the revolution. The Austrians were well mounted, well equipped—their disaster had not yet come; and the army—the Tsar's army—having no ammunition, fought to the death, fought their way to Lvoff with the butt-end of their rifles. Great time that!—Paul remembered thinking that it was not good enough and that he and some of his mates—amongst whom Mosenthal—decided that running away was a great deal better. They were caught and dragged to Lvoff, where they were to have been shot, only the superior authorities had other things to think about than shooting a few cowards.

Anyway, that was a long time ago. There had been a good many revolutions of the social wheel since then; and now chance was going to give it yet another turn, all in favour of Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine and his mates. Peter Abramovitch Stanko had now taken the direction of affairs; he had no need to demand silence, because what conversation there was after that final "There you are!" was carried on in whispers; but he wanted to know just what that foreigner and his mates would expect and what they were prepared to offer in exchange for services rendered

"Fifty-fifty," the Scotchman said firmly. "We want your help and you can't get on without us So don't let's argue"

"Let's hear the plan," Grossman suggested, and everyone nodded approval.

It was past four o'clock of this cold October morning before every phase, every eventuality of the plan had been discussed, argued over, nearly

fought over, and finally approved. Then only did they all rise and cheerfully bid one another good-night. The Scotchman—Mr. Kilts—was to catch the slow train from Koursk which would get him to Lvoff the following afternoon. Paul Sergine would follow a few days later. Peter Abramovitch Stanko, who was justice of the peace and commissary for the district, had seen to it that permits and visas were all in order. Mr Kilts had come with a fine proposition, one of the finest ever brought to the notice of this international organisation of thieves, forgers, and other miscreants, and as the Russian members of the organisation were important men in their own country, it was up to them to arrange for the safety and comfort of their British associates

On a row of pegs against the wall hung half a dozen furlined coats Each man selected his own and arranged the big fur collar about his ears They wore shabby clothes, all of them, and were apparently very short of soap, but they all had valuable fur coats and their wives wore priceless gems in their ears.

Peter Abramovitch with Paul Sergine and the foreigner from England were the first to leave Grossman, with the obsequiousness peculiar to his race, opened the door to them and bowed them out with many scrapings and arching of his long, lean spine When he pulled open the door, the snow and wind hit him in the face It was the coldest hour of the night; some two hours later the cold pale dawn would break behind the pine-clad hills Grossman busied himself with a couple of storm-lanterns and gave one to Peter Abramo-

vitch, and together the three men went out into the night.

The others tarried awhile longer. It was a big affair that they had been discussing. No doubt the thought of it would keep them awake a long while yet.

"How would you like to go to England, Aaron Mosenthal?" the innkeeper asked, when at last they were all ready to go.

"I shouldn't mind England," Mosenthal replied blandly; "it's the journey I shouldn't like. It's all right for Paul Sergine. He likes the sea, but I'm mightily afraid of it."

"Bah!" Grossman retorted with a guffaw, "you were born to be hanged, Aaron Mosenthal, not to be drowned."

But somehow the jest fell flat. One of the others instinctively passed a quivering hand across his throat.

"Make no such jokes, Jakob Grossman," he said. "If we should fail——"

"Who's going to fail?" the other broke in with a high cackle. "I said, 'when we succeed,' not 'if we fail.'"

One by one they trooped out of the isba.

"I think the sunrise will bring a thaw," one of them said irrelevantly

"Well, good-night all," Grossman called out at the last. "Good luck to us all, I say. We'll need it."

When they had all gone, he bolted the door after them, and having banked up the fire and switched out the light, he went contentedly to bed beside his frau, who was already snoring and

knew nothing of the fortune which her lord and master hoped to get with the help of his comrades in far-off England and that of Peter Abramovitch Stanko, justice of the peace (save the mark!) and people's commissary for the commune of Ostolga in the province of Koursk.

BOOK II

The Celestial City — I

On the rare occasions when Lady Chartley was "at home," the whole of the élite of Cannes society and of the neighbourhood got into its motors and drove over to the beautiful Château de Pertuis. These were memorable afternoons. There had only been three in the last two years; but whatever other engagement one had, it had to be put aside for the sake of this one important social event. It would have been terrible indeed to be asked, "Are you going to the Château this afternoon?" and obliged to answer, "No; I have promised to go over to Nice to see So-and-so, an old friend," etc. Nobody would have believed in the old friend. the conclusion would inevitably be, "Poor things! they haven't been asked." And there would be a kind of commiserating lifting of the eyebrows and a gentle query, "You don't know the Chartleys, perhaps." And one either knew the Chartleys or one did not. And that was all there was to it.

And if you belonged to the set that was asked to the Château de Pertuis once during the season, then you were indeed fortunate. You drove over on a beautiful, sunny spring day—it was always fine when Lady Chartley had an "at home"—up the Corniche d'Or, and you admired the famous view, when the dust from charabancs and other

motors did not intervene like an evil-smelling veil between you and the sea, way down below, that glittered like a sheet of sapphire all besprinkled with diamonds. And as you drove along you recognised the occupants of other cars who also were fortunate enough to be going to the Château

And then when you got there, you met all your friends, all the élite They were all there, all the people you knew and who, of course, were the only people worth knowing; they stood about in the wonderful marble hall, or made their way up the grand staircase, and they talked about the weather, and the shortness of the season, and the particular form of "flu" they were afflicted with last month Also about the respective merits of Cannes and Monte Carlo as the chief resort of fashion. And presently they would catch sight of the hostess, standing, perhaps, at the moment at the head of the stairs, in one of those wonderful blue gowns specially "created" for her by Pierre Pommard, a certain shade of blue that vied with the colour of her eyes and enhanced their wonder-look and their mystery. Having caught sight of Lady Chartley, the men would try hard to get at least one look from those mysterious eyes, in which sadness and joy seemed for ever to be chasing one another; and the women would study on that prettily shaped golden head the latest way of wearing shingled hair—very smooth it was this year, and brushed obliquely across the head at the back, rich waves over the temples, and delicious curls to hide the ears.

Then when Lady Chartley had passed on to other guests, or concentrated on the important

duty of welcoming the august personage who had just entered the hall, the élite in their numbers strolled into the winter garden, where tea was served to the accompaniment of a Russian Balalaïka orchestra, lately arrived in Cannes, whilst those who were artistically minded paused in one or other of the stately reception-rooms to look on the two Romneys, the Gainsborough, and the three Raeburns which Sir Philip Chartley had recently brought across from his place in Rutlandshire, in order to adorn his home here in the South. Others, again, wandered out into the garden, from whence, right over a foreground of tangled anemone roses and judas trees in full bloom, they gazed on the most beautiful view to be obtained on the Riviera, right over Théoule and Cannes and the Pointe de l'Esquillon on one side, and on the other over the massed Peaks of the Estérels, with Mont Vinaigre wrapped in a silvery mist, and the blue Mediterranean merged in the blue of the sky.

There was always something to see at the Château, something to admire, something for every taste, however fastidious. There was also plenty for the gossip-mongers to talk about: and even the élite is not above gossiping, while sipping excellent China tea, coffee, or chocolate, and eating all the cream tarts, the effect of which could only be held in check by a Parisian corsetière of renown or a season at Brides-les-Bains

There was a cosy corner made up of luxurious chairs and cushions, a small table covered with delicacies, and a background of trailing roses, where Mrs, Silverthorne held a miniature court

She was an American of great wealth and Parisian taste in dress. Until Lady Chartley's advent upon the social horizon of Cannes, Mrs Silverthorne had been its queen. So when an enthusiastic twister with profound "feminist" tendencies exclaimed eagerly:

"Isn't Lady Chartley just too lovely? And her gown to-day, isn't it a dream?" Mrs Silverthorne only remarked coolly:

"Yes! She isn't as young as she was, is she? I don't know that that blue is as judicious as it was a few years ago."

But there were two men sipping tea in that same cosy corner where Mrs. Silverthorne—whose age was as uncertain as her ancestry—held her miniature court, and they protested loyally and loudly.

"A few years ago!" one of them exclaimed "Great Lord! why, she hasn't been long out of the schoolroom"

He was a young Captain who had served with some distinction in the Air Force, and he ought to have known better than to make such a [illegible] because, as a matter of fact, Mrs. S[illegible] wh[illegible] gave very smart dinner and sup[illegible] chasing [illegible] was in other ways very kind [illegible] study one [illegible] bers of H M's fighting [illegible] the latest way [illegible] —a little older and one [illegible] smooth it was [illegible] Colonels who inhabi[illegible]oss the head at [illegible] danger, broke in hurrie[illegible]ples, and delic[illegible]
"How long have the C[illegible]

Mrs Silverthorne [illegible]artley had pass[illegible] meaning that she ne[illegible]trated on the [illegible]

"I really couldn't tell you," she said. "Some time, I know."

"Three years I was at the wedding."

This remark was made by an elderly spinster, who, though plain, poor, and insignificant, was always to be seen at every social function, big or small, all along the coast.

"I think Miss Murray is right," the young Captain, heedless of storm-clouds, put in eagerly. "I remember——"

"Oh! I remember the wedding perfectly too," Mrs. Silverthorne broke in coldly. "I didn't know anybody had been asked. It was a very plain affair and kept very quiet, so I understood at the time, because Sir Philip's family didn't approve."

"Sir Philip had no one to consult but himself," Miss Murray rejoined. "He was quite an insignificant young man in those days and could marry whom he pleased. He covered himself with glory in the war, got the D.S.O. with two bars, the Legion of Honour, the Croix de Guerre. and I don't know what else. But after he got himself demobbed he just took up farming, because he liked an outdoor life, and had been very badly done in by the Germans only a few weeks before the armistice."

Mrs. Silverthorne disposed her ermine cloak more becomingly around her shoulders. Though the spring day was unusually warm and the atmosphere in the winter garden deliciously soft, it was always cold enough to wear an ermine cloak that had cost ninety thousand francs

"How very interesting," she said, and smiled

indulgently at the ugly old maid. "I thought that farming was just Sir Philip Chartley's hobby."

"So it is in a way, now," Miss Murray rejoined, "but when he first took it up, he meant it seriously. It was only two years ago, you know, that Sir Philip's cousin, Sir Peter Chartley, met with a terrible accident. He and his two sons were drowned in an awful boating fatality in Scotland. Phil came into the title then and into one of the biggest fortunes in England"

The two Englishmen nodded silently. They remembered the tragic circumstance.

"Ah!" Mrs. Silverthorne sighed, "if he had known what was coming, Sir Philip perhaps would not have married quite so—what shall I say?—precipitately"

"Why should you say that?" Miss Murray queried sharply

"My dear Miss Murray!" was the other woman's retort.

"What?"

"We all know about that affair in Monte Carlo between Lady Chartley—or Mademoiselle Sterne as she was then—and the Comte de Malsabre"

"And what about it? Malsabre behaved like a cad"

"I dare say he did The English colony was very much down on him"

"I for one would have kicked him with pleasure," Colonel Clyfton muttered half audibly.

"I never knew the rights of the story," the young Captain whispered in reply

"We must always remember," Mrs. Silver-

thorne continued sententiously, "that in France the family counts for a great deal A man does not marry just to please himself. Now, I happen to know the old Count and Countess de Malsabre intimately. They had arranged a marriage for their son with Jeanne de Croisier——"

"Arranged a marriage!" the twister broke in in disgust "Lord preserve us!" and she glanced at the young Captain for approval of this sentiment. He murmured "Hear! hear!" and Miss Murray smiled approval; but Mrs. Silverthorne, who was conveying the impression that she only moved in the highest French aristocratic circles, resumed with a tone of indulgent reproof:

"My dear Sylvia, there are fewer unhappy marriages in France than in England or America, believe me! Love is all very well, but men don't always know their own mind when they ask a girl in marriage just because she has a pretty face A marriage between Mademoiselle Sterne and André de Malsabre would have been most unsuitable, and, fortunately for him, André realised this in time."

"Fortunately for them both, you mean," Miss Murray remarked drily

Mrs Silverthorne shrugged her shoulders, and selected a marron glacé before she spoke again

"I am not sure," she whispered as if to herself, "that Sir Philip wouldn't have been better for a family spoke in his matrimonial wheel"

"Well, I am quite sure that he wouldn't," the Colonel protested loyally. "I think that Philip Chartley is a jolly lucky fellow"

"She is so lovely!" the twister sighed

"Of course she had money," Mrs. Silverthorne put in. "And Miss Murray says that at that time Philip Chartley was just a young man studying farming, who had neither money nor prospects."

"I am quite sure," Miss Murray rejoined emphatically, "that Phil never thought either of money or prospects when he married Litta."

"But there is no getting away from the fact that Mademoiselle Sterne was very rich."

"She certainly had money of her own," Miss Murray was willing to admit, "but I don't think it was a great deal. She and Princess Bobrinsky lived very quietly in Monte Carlo——"

"I was told that she was some sort of connection of Princess Bobrinsky's," the Colonel now rejoined. "Her father, I believe, was Russian, and some people said that he had been agent or bailiff or something in the Princess's family."

"That I don't know," Miss Murray said curtly. "Princess Bobrinsky is devoted to Litta, and that's about all I know."

"Then I know a little bit more than that, Miss Murray," the twister broke in with all the eagerness of her admiration for Lady Chartley. "Princess Bobrinsky told mother that she had first met Lady Chartley in the Train Bleu on her way to Monte Carlo"

"That sounds more likely," Mrs. Silverthorne said acidly, "than the story of the Russian agent who was a connection of the Princess. Well, Sylvia dear," she went on graciously, "what else did Gabrielle Bobrinsky tell your mother?"

"Oh! not much more than that It seems that

the Princess had booked what she thought was a single berth on the Train Bleu. When she got to Calais she found, rather to her horror, that she had been put in a double berth, and that she was going to have a travelling companion."

"Railway companies are awful thieves," Miss Murray remarked sententiously.

"And I suppose that the unexpected travelling companion was Mademoiselle Sterne," the Colonel suggested.

"Jolly nice!" was the Captain's curt comment.

"Yes," the twister went on eagerly. "Princess Bobrinsky told mother that she was simply knocked over when she saw this girl coming along. She was beautifully dressed—only in a plain, tailor-made I mean, but beautiful, and she had on an adorable hat—and then you know those lovely blue eyes. Princess Bobrinsky said she had never seen anything like them"

"So she promptly fell in love with the girl," was the old Colonel's conclusion.

"I don't wonder either," echoed the Captain.

"Gabrielle Bobrinsky is a dear," Miss Murray rejoined. "She was lonely and so was the girl. They struck up a friendship on the way. I remember," she went on, "Litta Chartley telling me one day about this meeting in the Train Bleu."

"Very romantic," Mrs Silverthorne remarked drily

"Gabrielle and Litta have remained friends, which is more than most women do when they are thrown a lot in each other's company. But these two travelled about together a lot—mostly in Italy, and they spent one or two winters in

Monte Carlo, until that Malsabre affair came on and then Litta's marriage."

"I met them in London about three seasons ago," Colonel Clyfton remarked. "But they did not go about a great deal."

"London society was getting rather tired of Russian refugees by that time," was Mrs. Silverthorne's acid comment, at which Miss Murray's loyalty was at once up in arms.

"Gabrielle Bobrinsky," she broke in hotly, "was a Balleine of Balleidoo, one of the oldest families in Fifeshire; they have owned Balleidoo for eight hundred years," she added, with the merest hint of spitefulness in her well-bred voice, "and that is a good enough recommendation for any girl she chooses to take about with her as friend or companion."

Mrs. Silverthorne, whose best-known forbear was a grandfather who had kept a grocery store at Frankfurt-on-the-Maine, gave a supercilious little laugh

"Quite good enough, my dear Miss Murray," she said, nibbling at a chocolate which she held between fingers that disappeared in an armoury of diamond rings—"quite good enough, I agree Especially when there is money to supplement the recommendation."

She rose and gathered her expensive cloak about her shoulders.

"I mustn't stop gossiping any longer, I am afraid," she said. "I see His Majesty has glanced once or twice in this direction I must go and pay my respects, or I shall get into trouble," she added playfully.

Then she turned to the young soldier.

"Remember, Captain Gurney," she said, "that we dine at nine this evening. The Grand Duchess is coming, and the Marquis and Marchioness of Flint, and the Field-Marshal and one or two others. Just an intimate little party. Don't forget."

"I am not likely to," the young man murmured. He was helping to adjust the expensive cloak, and he stooped to pick up the jewelled bag. It wouldn't do to offend Mrs Silverthorne; her parties were both numerous and fine. But he drew a sigh of relief when the lady sailed off in the direction where the august personage was sitting drinking tea between two ladies of uncertain age who made eyes at him.

"Spiteful old cat!" Miss Murray declared under her breath. And the others heartily concurred.

LADY CHARTLEY had seen the last of her guests depart.

"Thank you so much! It has been a perfect afternoon!" The stock phrase had been reiterated a hundred times and a hundred times Litta had replied with a set smile:

"I am so glad we had it so fine!" or some other mechanical remark equally futile.

"Where is Sir Philip?" most of the guests

had added. "I want to tell him how much we admired the garden."

And in answer to that Litta's stock phrase had been: "You will find him down in the hall. I am so glad you liked the garden."

How she had ever got through the afternoon she didn't know. Two hours and more of idle chatter and stock phrases, while her thoughts were all with Gabrielle Bobrinsky, who was waiting for her in the blue drawing-room that adjoined the winter garden. Litta had had the room closed against all visitors: Gabrielle, wanting of course to be alone, should have it all to herself. Forgetting all about the "at home," she had arrived less than a quarter of an hour before the first motor full of guests had drawn up at the gates. There hadn't been time for more than a brief, very brief account of the marvellous thing that had happened. And Litta, longing to hear more, had to leave Gabrielle in the blue room and to go into the great drawing-room and talk to a crowd of people for whom she cared less than nothing; whilst her thoughts ran riot in her brain.

Now at last they were all gone and Phil fortunately had gone off to change into what he called his working clothes, preparatory to seeing whether that fool of a gardener had put in his new strawberry plants properly. And Litta was free to join her friend. She found Gabrielle in the pretty blue room, sitting in the corner of the sofa, gazing meditatively into the fire. Though it was mid-April and the day had been almost hot, the fire seemed welcome now that the sun was going down. A cool wind still blew from the north-west and

the distant peaks of Cheiron and Haut Montel had not yet shed altogether their mantle of snow.

Litta ran impulsively to her friend, and sinking into the sofa close beside her, she took both her hands in hers.

"My dear!" she said. "I don't know how I got through this awful afternoon. Every moment I longed to run away and hear more—more of this wonderful thing. I just hated all these futile, chattering people, and begrudged every minute they kept me away from you"

Gabrielle gave the delicate hands a tender squeeze. Her sad eyes had lighted up at sight of her friend, and now lingered fondly on the exquisite picture before her: the dainty profile, the fringe of dark lashes that half-veiled and yet enhanced the glory of the eyes, the soft wavy hair in colour like a ripe chestnut, and the perfect curve of neck and shoulder, the bloom of which even the row of pearls—a priceless gem of dazzling sheen—could only rival, but not eclipse.

"It is wonderful," Litta reiterated with a little gasp of excitement "Too, too wonderful!"

"Too wonderful to be true, you mean?" Gabrielle asked in her quiet, gentle voice.

"No, I am not going to say that," Litta replied impulsively. "But I must hear more—more, before I can judge."

She paused a moment, as if to collect her thoughts, to bring them all back under control Away from all the silly, senseless happenings of this afternoon, the tea-table gossip, the idle chatterings, the royal personage, the adulation and

snobbishness, back to Gabrielle and to the wonderful thing that had occurred. With a thoughtful pucker between her brows she was gathering together the threads of the short conversation she had had with her friend, before the first of that stream of futile people had come to interrupt, and all the while she scrutinised Gabrielle's pale face, which alone betrayed something of that inward excitement, which must have been intense, in the glow of the dark eyes and the slight quiver of the sensitive lips.

"Darling!" she said at last, taking up the thread of conversation just where it had been broken by all those tiresome people, "are you sure, quite, quite sure, that the handwriting is your husband's?"

"I am morally convinced that it is," Gabrielle Bobrinsky replied quietly. "Of course the writing is shaky——it took me ages to decipher. But think of the conditions, my dear: in prison, or by the roadside—a hand stiff with cold—the mind almost tottering under the strain of privation——"

She too was ready to pick up those broken threads; she had no need to collect her thoughts or to bring her mind back to them. She had sat there, alone, for over two hours, and her thoughts had never strayed once from the great, the wonderful thing. But now she paused, her voice husky with sobs. She had closed her eyes for a moment in her effort to control her nerves, and thus failed to catch the slight movement of impatience which Litta had been unable to repress. Dearly as she loved Gabrielle, deeply as she sympathised with her over the strange event, her practical mind still rebelled

against this blind belief in what seemed like a fairy-tale to her, whilst to her friend it just meant stark reality. She turned away very quickly, so as to hide even a look which might have wounded this dear, suffering woman who was clinging blindly to a slender thread of hope.

"Would you like to see the letter?" Gabrielle asked presently, when she had recovered her self-control.

"My dear!" Litta protested, "I can't read Russian."

"No, I know, but I will translate as I go along. It is quite short."

Gabrielle fumbled in her bag and drew out from it a stained and much creased paper, which somehow in itself looked pathetic and unreal.

With a gentle, loving gesture she laid it on her knee, then softly stroked it up and down, smoothing out those creases that half obliterated the handwriting. Then, satisfied that she had her friend's attention, she read, translating the Russian into English.

"MY BELOVED GABRIELLE,

"I am alive—sufficiently alive to think and dream of you. Providence has brought Paul Sergine to this awful hole where I have been a prisoner for over five years. How I have kept my reason, I don't know. God willed it so, no doubt Why those devils don't shoot me, I can't imagine, especially now that I am getting weak for my daily task. Come to me, my beloved. Paul will tell you how you can save me from this hell"

Long after Gabrielle had finished reading there was silence in this pretty room, all gay with the firelight and the glow of the sunset that came slanting in through the tall windows. Only the slight crackling of the paper broke this silence, as Gabrielle's delicate hands folded it with loving care and then slipped it inside her gown.

"And this man," Litta asked after a while, "this Sergine has brought you nothing but this letter?"

"Nothing."

"And you know him well?"

"Very well He was Cyril's secretary for two years before the war."

"Only two years?"

"He was faithful and honest We never had to complain of him. He travelled with us everywhere. When the war broke out we were in England; he had, of course, to leave for Russia immediately to join up. So I lost sight of him—until he came last night."

"But how did he find you—here in France? How did he know you were here? Did he come all this way at his own expense—on the chance of finding you?" Litta rapped out these questions one on the top of the other. Her voice sounded harsh, impatient; there was evidently something in this whole affair that roused her suspicions, her sense of danger for her friend, her opposition to the wild scheme which she instinctively knew that Gabrielle had already formulated

But Gabrielle only smiled, her perfect calm in strange contrast to Litta's vehemence. She seemed so sure of herself, so sure of the truth

of this miracle which had just happened, and of the fidelity of the messenger who had come at the bidding of God Himself to bring her this word of hope. And when Litta had exhausted her string of questions, she replied with her gentle smile, patiently, like one explaining something to a stubborn child that couldn't or wouldn't understand.

"I'll tell you, dear. Paul Sergine, who brought me this precious letter last night, fought all through the war; he was a corporal in Cyril's regiment and later was with him during that awful Wrangel campaign. I knew that Cyril was with Wrangel, but the last I heard of him was just before the final disaster. What happened to him after that I never knew and I have never dared to think. All that I gathered from newspaper reports and so on was that this detachment was one of those that covered the retreat to Odessa. They fought a rear-guard action, and most of the officers were killed: a few only were taken prisoners; the men were forced into the Red Army, and Paul Sergine was one of these."

"The wretch!"

"Poor wretch, *I* say. It was the Red Army for those men, else their lives, or worse. Anyway, Sergine, it seems, was recently in garrison at Koursk, and on several occasions he formed part of a detachment put to guard a gang of prisoners who were repairing the railway. How he came to notice one of these miserable wretches he doesn't know, but the face suddenly struck him as vaguely familiar."

"It was Prince Bobrinsky," Litta cried in-

in it all. A fortnight ago, if you remember, there was some commission or other sent over from Russia to England. As usual, these people came with a regular retinue of typists, servants, and so on; amongst the typists was Paul Sergine. I told you that he was loyal; and he has proved himself to be intelligent. He set to work at once to find me: traced me to my little flat in Knightsbridge and thence to my hotel in Nice; took French leave from his job, and arrived from England yesterday; the Rapide from Paris was several hours late, but he turned up at my hotel at eight o'clock, just as I had finished dinner, and—and—that's the whole story, Litta dear. Simpler than you thought, isn't it?"

But apparently Litta did not think it so simple as all that Her enthusiasm had been momentary; cold reason and colder doubt had already swept it away; objections and arguments were forcing their way back into her mind.

"He risked a great deal, it seems to me, in order to get to you," she mused. "And yet you say that he was in your employ about two years only Not like an old retainer whose life is bound up with his employers."

"Paul knows that he risks punishment for taking French leave in coming to see me; but punishment won't be very severe—he thinks he may have to forfeit a month's wages. In any case, he won't, of course, mention my name"

"You are determined to believe in him?" Litta commented drily

"If I lost faith now," Gabrielle said with sudden vehemence, whilst a warm glow quickly rushed

to her cheeks, "I would die. But I have no cause to doubt," she continued in her habitual, quiet monotone. "I know Paul, you see, and there's something—something undefinable but very, very real which tells me that this message is from Cyril, and that I must go to him, as soon as ever possible."

"Go to him? What do you mean?"

"That I start for Koursk as soon as my passport is in order."

"Gabrielle!" Litta exclaimed, her voice expressing all the horror that she felt. "My dear——!"

"Well?"

"You can't go to Russia."

"Why not?"

"You'd never get back"

"That wouldn't matter much," Gabrielle said softly, "if I found Cyril."

"How do you know that you will find him?"

"I know where he is He is waiting for me. In his letter he asks me to come to him and free him from this hell"

"And this wonderful Paul Sergine has told you how you can do that?"

"Yes!"

"He has actually told you," Litta insisted, "that Prince Bobrinsky, your husband, wants you to go and meet him in Russia, where, if you ever got there, you would probably share his fate."

"Cyril asks me to go to Russia," Gabrielle assented with quiet obstinacy, "but not only to meet him."

"Then for what purpose?"

But Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders, and the sigh which she gave sounded forlorn and not a little hopeless.

"*If I told you,*" she said, "*you would still disbelieve, you would more than ever try to dissuade me from what I am absolutely determined to do.*"

It was Litta's turn to shrug.

"If you are so determined, my dear," she said, "what does it matter if I do try to oppose you? You may as well tell me," she added after a slight pause, during which her eager, luminous eyes had wandered searchingly over her friend's wan face. "What further folly are you about to commit?" those eyes seemed to ask, and as if in answer to the mute question, Gabrielle said with sudden firmness.

"Paul says, and I know this to be a fact, that the whole of the bureaucracy of Russia is corrupt and venal to the core. From the highest to the lowest, every man in office has his price."

"I dare say. What of it?"

"Just this When it became clear to every thinking man in Russia that Kerensky was much too weak to stem the tide of revolution and anarchy that was sweeping over the country, Cyril got in touch with his bankers in Petrograd, who had charge of a quantity of valuables belonging to him, money, securities, jewellery, and so on He felt that valuables were no longer safe in the cellars of the bank, because there was every possibility that the revolution would sweep into the city like a tornado, without any warning, and that looting and

pillaging would at once become general. So Cyril withdrew from the bank everything that was both portable and negotiable and conveyed it to another place he considered very much safer, and which was nearer to his own estates in the province of Koursk And so——”

“Did the ubiquitous Paul tell you all this?” Litta broke in curtly.

“No. I knew that all the time. In the very last letter which Cyril managed to get through to me, he told me just what he had done with the money and the jewels.”

“And you really think, my dear, that you will be able to go to Russia, get hold of your valuables, use them in order to buy your husband's freedom and your own safety? Do you really believe that you could do all that? Alone? Or do you know of someone who will help you, and see that you come to no harm?”

“No,” Gabrielle replied quietly. “I know nobody who would trouble about me to that extent. I am going alone.”

“You can't!” Litta protested energetically.

“My dear, I am going,” Gabrielle retorted with all the obstinacy peculiar to the meek.

“When?”

“I have told you, as soon as my passport is in order.”

“Who is seeing to your passport?”

“Paul.”

“The ubiquitous Paul?”

“He has friends in London.”

“Those sort of people always have friends in London.”

"What sort of people do you mean?"

"I mean Russians, Bolsheviks, Germans, foreign agitators of all sorts. The fraternities' headquarters always seem to be in London"

"Which is all right for me, as it happens," Gabrielle rejoined with a smile. "I shall have to go back to England, in any case, to see to one or two things. I should like to let my flat, if possible, and I shall want to pick up some clothes. I have nothing down here."

"You have thought it all out, I see," Litta remarked drily.

"Yes, I have had a long night in which to think things out."

"When do you leave here?"

"To-morrow. I should have gone to-day, only I wanted to tell you"

"My dear! I wish to God I could come with you—if you really are determined to go"

"I am determined to go," Gabrielle reiterated firmly, "and there can be no question of your coming with me. I wouldn't have you, for one thing," she went on with a smile, "and Sir Philip wouldn't allow it"

"I wouldn't ask him," Litta retorted with a sudden note of harshness in her fresh, young voice. "Thank Heaven I'm not on such terms with my husband that I need his permission. And I am not dependent on him for supplies"

A hot flush had risen to her cheeks, and a frown of irritation gave her beautiful face a sudden look of hard obstinacy She turned an uncompromising back on her friend and stared, motionless, into the glow.

"I know, my dear, I know," Princess Bobrinsk said in gentle, soothing tones; "but as a matter o fact you couldn't get a visa for Russia without a great deal of trouble and a lot of fuss. And what I want above everything for my journey is secrecy. It is most important, for Cyril's sake."

"And the omnipotent Paul is going to arrange this for you also?"

"I told you he had a friend in the commission"

"And you are *going straight to this place in* the Something province?"

"Yes, I am going straight there to get the money and jewels, and then see how I can make use of them for Cyril's benefit."

"And do you mean to tell me that you have no one in the world who would go with you on this mad adventure?"

"You may call it a mad adventure if you like, but there certainly is not anybody in the world who would share it with me, even if I cared to have a companion"

"But you've got relations?" insisted Litta

"None," Gabrielle replied firmly. "None, that is, who care two straws about me. I think I told you once that my father and mother were killed in a terrible motor accident a couple of years before the war My only brother, Tom Balleine, died of wounds which he got at Vimy Ridge The title and property have gone to a cousin who cares far less for me than he does for his dogs. My people were always poor and I only have a small jointure—just enough to live on I am no longer smart, nor pretty, nor amusing; I don't dance, I don't play tennis, and can't afford bridge.

It was only when I married Cyril that I was popular with the family. Cyril was rich, and they liked to talk of me as their cousin the Princess Bobrinsky, 'wife, don't you know, of the Tsar's Grand Marshal.' But now, if they ever mention my husband or me it is only with the remark that they never could make out what so distinguished a personage could see in poor Gabrielle. And you know, dear," she added with a quaintly humorous smile, "when you are once referred to as 'poor So-and-So,' it is the last word in social ostracism. As a matter of fact, it was the family who persuaded me to remain in England when Cyril went to join his regiment in Russia at the outbreak of the war. I wanted to go with him. I hated to see him go—we had never been away from one another for more than a couple of days since we were married. But you know how it was during those first few weeks of the war: it was only going to last three months—by Christmas it would be all over—and all the talk about the Russian steam-roller. And then my little Alec was very delicate. I couldn't have left him, and I shouldn't have dared to take him to Russia with me. Anyway, I stayed. My little Alec died, and until last night I thought that my dear husband was dead."

The Celestial City — III

LITTA had listened in silence and almost motionless to the sad story, which was only a repetition of what she knew already. But somehow the

repetition did not fret her; the occasion, the amazing occasion, seemed to justify the Princess Bobrinsky's reiteration of the oft-told tale. It was only when Gabrielle paused and the sad story had come to an end that Litta once more questioned her friend.

"And you never thought," she asked, "to get hold of your valuables before this?"

"No. Not really," Gabrielle replied with an indifferent shrug. "You see, so many of us have been hugging the fond, foolish dream that one day everything would come right in Russia, that those of us who have been driven out into exile would all return some day and come back into our own. Then I had nobody—or thought I had nobody—to worry about. It didn't seem worth while to risk one's life, and probably worse, to go on what you call this mad adventure. Money meant so little to me—until last night"

"If it is only a question of money——" Litta exclaimed impulsively.

"You would offer it me with both your dear lovely hands," Gabrielle Bobrinsky broke in quickly, and for once her voice lost its listless monotone and her eyes glowed with unshed tears. "I know, dear—I know. You are the most wonderful friend in the world, and why you should bother about me at all I can't think."

"Don't trouble to think," Litta rejoined softly, "or rather put it all down to the fact that I am not altogether an ungrateful beast, after all you've meant to me"

"No more than you have meant to me, my darling. You were the one bright star in my life

during those awful times when gradually I began to realise that I should never see Cyril again. I felt so utterly lonely—and I can't tell you what a horrid feeling that is."

"I know," Litta murmured under her breath.

"Oh! my dear!" Gabrielle protested with her sad little smile, "I never think of you as lonely. You have such a host of friends—look at the crowd you had here this afternoon—and you have your husband"

"Yes, as you say, I have my husband."

And as she said this Litta's voice once more grew harsh and almost shrill, as if a sob was fighting to pass her throat and she was trying to crush it down with a mirthless laugh and flippant phrase. She picked up a cigarette, lit it, then threw it down and jumped to her feet: there was a jerkiness in all her movements now. She knelt on the hearthrug and picked up a heavy log to throw on the fire. With it in her hand, she paused, kneeling before the fire, the glow from the burning wood casting a soft, flickering light upon her face. Everything was so still! so still! just the crackling of the fire, and the ticking of the English grandfather clock, and now and again a gust of wind causing the orange trees below the terrace to shake and rustle their sharp, metallic leaves

Gabrielle was silent in the corner of the sofa, thoughtfully twirling her wedding ring round her finger, her thoughts far away in that cruel, far-off Russia, where the husband she adored starved and toiled as a convict.

Everything was so still! Litta, kneeling in front of the fire, gazed into the glow, searching in the

depths of those mysterious fiery caverns for an answer to the many puzzles that agitated her mind—her friend's future, this fairy-tale in which she could not bring herself to believe, and also something of her own destiny, which a strange, unaccountable foreboding told her was somehow interlinked with this miracle of a long-lost husband and a buried treasure.

So still!—now the wood even had ceased to crackle, even Gabrielle had ceased to sigh. Only the old clock ticked away with solemn monotone, and presently a gentle tap-tap, irritating in its persistence, disturbed the silence that seemed to become so full of portent A tap-tap that, after a moment or two, roused Litta from her dreams. She threw the log on the fire and struggled to her feet.

Large folding glass doors shut the room off from the beautiful winter garden, which in its turn gave on a loggia and so on to the garden beyond One of the folds of the door had come ajar, and the draught was causing it to swing to and fro Litta went to close it. As she did so she gave a peep into the winter garden, and for the space of a few seconds inhaled the delicious scent of the Niel roses that hung in heavy festoons from pillars and roof, and mingled with the more heavy odour of heliotrope and hyacinths, the subtle, insinuating perfume of freesia and lemon-scented verbena. In one corner there was an artificial rockery where clumps of brilliant scarlet anemones flaunted their garish colour against the soft lichen-covered grey of the stones, whilst farther on the columns of the loggia were

smothered in the brilliant veils of purple bougainvillea.

The staff of well-trained servants had already obliterated every trail left by the lounging, tea-drinking crowd. Supreme order and peace reigned in this kingdom of flowers. Amidst the bowers of plants and blossoms the cosy armchairs once more invited to repose, the satin cushions, of hues more vivid than tulips or anemones, no longer held the impress of expensive ermine cloaks or bejewelled arms. The small tables had been cleared of empty tea-cups and dishes of cream-tarts, and were once more littered with books and papers, whilst on the mosaic floor, the rich Persian rugs, soft and warm to the feet, were spread again in order to deaden the tread that might disturb that perfect quiescence which once more reigned in this world peopled by flowers. Litta's eyes roamed instinctively round the familiar place, which somehow at this moment seemed to her more than ever before to represent a priceless casket holding all that men value so much on this earth—ancestry, culture, affluence, the means wherewith to satisfy every whim and indulge every caprice.

And as she gazed round she gave a long, long sigh—a sigh that had in it something of impatience and perhaps something of satiety, but also an infinity of longing. Longing for what? She couldn't have told you, would have flouted the idea, no doubt, that she really longed vaguely for what her poor, plain, uninteresting friend was getting in such plenty: romance, adventure, hope, and in the end perhaps a return to that love of long ago, all the more precious as it seemed to rise again

from the grave; above all, the power to do, to live every minute of this dull, wearying life, to risk everything for the sake of the beloved, to throw life and liberty as a hazard, like a gambler, determined to win everything, yet ready to lose all—the power, in fact, to act and to suffer, to have something to believe in, something to hope for, and something to love.

The Celestial City IV

DID that sigh mean all that? Litta didn't know. The next moment she would have closed the door and gone back to her friend, when a voice said suddenly quite close to her:

"I do like these little fellows that have lost their tails Come and look at this one, Litta"

Sir Philip Chartley, stooping above the rockery, was intent on the examination of a small lizard whose elegant figure was unaccountably curtailed through the absence of its tail. A clump of palms had hidden him from view. Litta, unaware of his presence, smothered a startled little cry.

"I had no idea you were here," she said. "Why didn't you come in? Gabrielle Bobrinsky is here."

"There now, he has scootled off, the rascal," Sir Philip remarked, before he straightened out his tall figure and somewhat shamefacedly replied to his wife· "I couldn't face Princess Bobrinsky like this, could I?"

Ruefully he held out his hands—strong. capable hands they seemed to be, but for the moment

covered with earth, and distinctly reeking of manure.

"I've had to put those strawberry plants in myself. That fool Falicon would have ruined the lot"

He had on an old tweed coat and nondescript waistcoat and a pair of flannel trousers that probably were clean when he first changed into them, but were now a mere patchwork of green slime, brown mould, and various other kinds of dirt. His face was very hot and very moist, and his straw hat, which had not only seen better days but apparently many a better year, was tilted at the back of his head

"Pardon me, my dear," he said with an awkward little laugh, "for not taking off my hat. I'd better go and wash now, hadn't I?"

He seemed in a great hurry to go, and had already turned to go down towards the loggia, where a side-door would give him access into the house without having to enter the boudoir, when his wife called once more to him:

"Phil!" she said, and there was just a suspicion of pathos in her appeal. "Gabrielle is in a grave difficulty and——"

"Is she, by Jove?" Sir Philip broke in, with that same shamefaced little laugh. "I am thunderingly sorry. Poor beggar! These Russians are always in difficulties, ain't they? I'll just get my cheque-book——" And obviously glad of the excuse, he once more turned to go But Litta's indignant cry once more held him back.

"It is not a question of money, Phil," she said, letting her voice drop to a whisper, "and for

gracious' sake don't let her hear you. Can't you, for once," she went on, with that little note of appeal in her voice, "tear yourself away from your plants and your beetles and come and talk sensibly with Gabrielle in the blue room?"

Sir Philip didn't seem to relish the idea, however. "If you wish it, my dear," he said with a sigh

"I do wish it," she retorted impatiently, "and I also wish you wouldn't call me 'my dear.'"

He gazed at her in utter bewilderment, took off his hat and thoughtfully scratched his head. Altogether he looked so bewildered and so dense that Litta couldn't help laughing in spite of her vexation.

"Go and get washed," she said impatiently, "and for goodness' sake don't bring that eternal cheque-book of yours down. You seem to think that every trouble can be smoothed over with money"

"I generally find it can," he rejoined good-humouredly.

"One would think you were a nouveau riche," she retorted.

This looked like the commencement of one of those periods of bickering which had become rather frequent of late in the Chartley household—one-sided bickering, that is, because Sir Philip, lazy and good-tempered, always vacated the field as soon as he realised that his wife's nerves were on edge Unfortunately for him, he did not as a rule realise this quite soon enough, with the result that bickerings often ended in acrimonious words on the one part and a kind of indifferent

resignation on the other On this occasion, however, the man was quicker than usual to understand that Litta was in one of her worst moods Gabrielle probably had had a bad effect on her nerves, and women's nerves,—well! Sir Philip was in holy terror of them. So he ran away, and Litta, with tears of exasperation in her eyes, went back to her friend.

The Celestial City V

GABRIELLE was still sitting in a corner of the sofa, still staring into the fire, still toying with the wedding ring on her finger. Her quietude, her apparent listlessness, which suggested an extraordinary fund of obstinacy, had the effect of further exacerbating Litta's nerves

"Did you hear me talking to Phil?" she asked curtly.

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes, dear!"

"You heard what he said?"

"I couldn't help it But there was nothing, was there, you didn't want me to hear?"

Litta shrugged her shoulders "Oh!" she said drily, "he doesn't mean it, of course, but he has unpleasant ways of putting things sometimes."

"Very direct But Sir Philip is so kind——"

"Why don't you call him Phil?" Litta queried abruptly.

"I've never known him well enough. And he always calls me Princess."

"You don't like him?"

Gabrielle couldn't help smiling at this direct, rather embarrassing question so characteristic of her friend.

"I don't think Sir Philip likes me," she replied evasively.

"Oh! one never knows Phil's likes and dislikes," Litta retorted; and Gabrielle, with a shrewd, knowing glance directed at her friend's glowing face, rejoined softly: "Only sometimes"

"You mean when he proposed to me?"

"Why, of course."

"You think he was in love with me then?"

"Don't you?" the other woman riposted.

Litta shrugged her shoulders, picked up another cigarette, lit it, then said deliberately:

"Frankly, my dear, I don't know."

"How do you mean you don't know? A woman always knows that, my dear."

"I mean just what I say. I don't know if Phil was ever in love with me. He certainly isn't in love with me now."

"Then why should he have proposed to you?"

"My dear, you forget that until a couple of years ago Phil had only his pension to subsist on, and that I——"

"Litta!" the other cried, indignant

"I know, I know," Lady Chartley rejoined with a quick, impatient sigh. "I dare say it sounds pretty beastly of me to say that. But if you only knew how I have wondered—and wondered——"

"Well, my dear, I should cease to wonder, and just accept the fact that Philip Chartley, as he was then, was just a rather gauche and timid lover,

and that you have proved more brilliant and popular than he had anticipated. This has made him still more gauche and you rather too impatient."

With a nervy gesture, Litta threw her freshly lighted cigarette into the fire.

"That isn't it a bit, my dear," she said with a hard little laugh. "Phil was always gauche, I admit, but he was not always wrapped up in his lizards and his manure, I can tell you You know that first year we were together in Monte Carlo?"

"Why, yes!"

"You remember the episode with André de Malsabre."

"Of course"

"Did you know that I was madly, passionately in love with him?"

"I was afraid you were, my dear. But you never spoke about him—not even to me."

"I thought I had met the love of my life. It was all so wonderful, so mysterious. I simply couldn't talk about it while it lasted. And then—afterwards——"

Once more her voice became hard, trenchant, all the softness gone out of it, her eyes glowing, not with introspection, but with a dull, obstinate wrath

"His family," she resumed after a moment or two, "persuaded him that it was his duty to marry a woman whose family escutcheon was as ancient as his own, and whose fortune was considerably greater than mine. You guessed that, I suppose, when you heard that he had become engaged to Jeanne de Crosier."

Gabrielle nodded in silence. It hurt her to hear her friend recapitulating the miserable story of that episode which she had watched in all its tragic details, without perhaps quite understanding how deeply it had affected Litta's life and character.

"André had found out, it seems," Litta went on, "that I only possessed a few thousands whereas Jeanne de Crosier had one or two millions. I realised afterwards that he had actually put the question to me, between two of his most passionate kisses, and that I, treating the matter as a joke of no importance, gave him the information he desired. After that he discovered that his family had long ago pledged his word to Mademoiselle de Crosier, she being of the same nationality as himself, the same religion, and so on, and so on. All this he told me one evening in a little motor-boat which we had hired to take us for a sea-trip by moonlight. The air felt like a butterfly's kiss upon my cheek, the sky was of an intense, translucent indigo, the sea murmured soft words and sighs against the sides of the boat, whilst I, shamed to my very soul, had to clasp my hands together to stop myself from striking him in the face. The lights of Mentone and of old Roquebrune were like eyes that blinked through the darkness, witnessing my shame. And then he dared—he dared—— My God! you know what Frenchmen are when it comes to family and marriage and—and—the other thing. He dared! I tell you he dared! My dear, I didn't think it was possible for any human being to hate another as I hated André de Malsabre then!"

She paused, her wrath dissolved in an overwhelming sorrow. Heavy tears gathered in her eyes She brushed them impatiently away. Gabrielle Bobrinsky, discreet and gentle as always, gave her hand an affectionate squeeze.

"Then Philip Chartley came along," she said more lightly.

"Yes," Litta rejoined slowly. "Phil came along You had introduced him to me a month or two before that."

"He was in the K.R.R. with my brother. I didn't know him very well, but some friends had written to me about him; I could see that he fell in love with you at first sight, but I never thought——"

"Nor did I," Litta broke in drily "There were other men, weren't there? But Phil's persistence won the day, his persistence and that awful sense of humiliation which made me feel like a lump of putty, ready to drift anywhere and into anything so long as I could forget. And then, Phil just happened to propose to me again that very same evening after that eventful moonlight trip on the sea which had changed my whole existence Nothing really seemed to matter, so as Phil insisted, I just said 'Yes' Just like that. It seemed so wonderful, after I had been made to feel that I was of less account than a flighty housemaid, that there should be a man who cared enough about me to want to marry me."

"Then what in the world made you say just now that——"

"That Phil was after my money?" Litta broke in with a note almost of defiance in her voice

"I only thought that lately. Not at the time. At the time I was such a little fool; I believed that when a man declared that he only wanted you for your own sake—for the privilege of making you happy without asking for anything in return, not even a caress—I believed that that meant the last word in love. I know better now."

Gabrielle frowned. "And do you mean to tell me that Philip——"

"Phil was at first just a very pleasant companion. We spent the winter season in London; then he took me to Italy, and I had the time of my life. I used to write to you, you remember, to tell you how happy I was"

"Yes! True! But I always detected a curious little note of discontent through all those glowing accounts of social triumphs and pleasures"

"No wonder," Litta retorted drily "I was getting older—wiser—I had women friends who told me things—I had seen André de Malsabre again and I realised what it was that I had once expected of life, and that Phil was never likely to give me."

"My dear!" Gabrielle protested with a vehemence which was altogether at variance with her usual placidity, "you must not say that. You are both young—and even though you have made a bad start——"

"But that's just it. We didn't make a bad start. We were friends—excellent friends—and at one time in Italy I thought——"

"Well, then?" Gabrielle broke in tactfully

"Well, then——" And Litta frowned as if searching her memory, searching for that

mysterious something which, she felt, had wrecked her life After a while she went on: "During that spring and while we were still in Italy, Phil's uncle and his two young cousins were drowned in that awful accident on the Tay, you remember?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"And," Litta continued, "Phil came into the title and the property. And from that moment he became a different man. At least I seem to trace it all to that. At first he seemed to love the place—and I must say Chart Court is a beautiful old house. Phil was just like a child with a new toy: he was going to do this, and he was going to change that, and he thanked God that he had studied enough to farm his own land Then he was going to stand for Parliament at the next general election, and so on. I can't say that I entered into all his enthusiasm I thought the place beautiful and all that, but I didn't want to come and live there Then I couldn't stand the neighbours. They could talk of nothing else but horses and hunting and runs, and I'd never been on a horse in my life Phil wanted to teach me, and I dare say I should have got to like the place well enough in time, if his relations hadn't interfered."

"There always are relations," Gabrielle remarked with a sigh, "who interfere."

"These did, anyway," Litta went on slowly, whilst she gazed moodily into the fire. "At any rate, it was directly after they arrived that a kind of change came over Phil. At first he only became dull as ditchwater, as if all the spirit

had gone out of him. Then gradually he got cranky and unbearably morose. At times he would hardly speak to me. Then he seemed to lose all interest in the place. He let most of the land to a farmer, withdrew his name from the list of possible candidates for the next elections Then one fine day he told me that, as I didn't seem to be happy in England, he had decided to buy a property in the neighbourhood of Cannes, where I could have the kind of society I enjoyed and he could indulge his taste in farming And here we are! Phil's taste for fowls and manure-heaps has developed into a mania, and I am left to spend my time as I please. Of course I have lots of friends at Cannes and at Nice, and I run into Monte Carlo as often as I can. But that is not the existence I dreamed of, I can tell you, and how much longer I shall be able to stand it is a matter which I have debated with myself very often of late. Phil seems to have forgotten altogether that I am only a couple of years older than I was when he married me and that——"

Gabrielle's kind, restraining hand made her pause, and after a moment or two she went on in a softer mood.

"You can't wonder that I have often envied you—your terrible sorrow, your happy memories —and now——"

"And you have no idea," Gabrielle mused, "what it was that changed Sir Philip so?"

"Not the remotest"

"Nobody came between you?" Gabrielle insisted Then she added tentatively: "No woman?"

"Not that I know of," Litta replied after an almost imperceptible moment of hesitation, which, however, did not escape the sharp eyes of her friend.

"You are not sure, Litta?"

"I thought I was, but——"

"But what?"

And as Litta sat silent, obviously pondering, Gabrielle insisted again:

"Was there a woman?"

"No! no!"

"The wife of M. de Malsabre?"

"Phil hardly knows her"

"Or some of his family?"

"No," Litta replied meditatively. "I don't think that any of the Malsabres had anything to do with it. Besides, Phil knew all about André I told him at the time. He married me on my own terms, knowing that I had been in love with André. No! no!" she reiterated slowly; "but you have set me thinking, and I wonder whether——"

"What?"

"Those awful relations. They descended in numbers on Chart Court—a few at a time, of course; but they were dreary people, my dear! The women wore their skirts to their ankles, and hats with flowers and plumes perched on the top of their heads. The men wore spats and invariably carried umbrellas, wet or fine. They none of them liked me. I soon saw that. They criticised my clothes, and made pointed remarks about my lips and my hair. There was one distant cousin in particular, who was one of the

executors of the uncle's will, and a kind of family lawyer. He was very suave with me and all that. But I could see that he couldn't bear me. He had a very plain daughter, and I suppose that he had wanted Phil to marry her. I wonder now whether amongst that lot—one of them contrived to make mischief."

"But, my dear," Gabrielle protested hotly, "Sir Philip wouldn't have listened to mischief-making."

"He wouldn't, I grant you, if he had cared for me. But by that time——"

She didn't conclude her sentence, but rose with that peculiar impatience of movement and gesture which was so characteristic of her. She picked up another log and threw it on the fire.

"I don't know," she said suddenly with a nervy little laugh, "why I should plague you with these stale reminiscences. They are not very attractive, and all that's happening to you is so much more interesting."

Gabrielle, tactful and gentle, as always, said nothing The reminiscences, she felt, had perhaps best be left to sleep once more the dreamless sleep of forgetfulness.

The shades of evening were rapidly drawing in. In this part of the world dawn and twilight are of singularly short duration; quickly the setting sun hides its glory behind the Estérels The peaks stood out now, a brilliant mass of rosy purple against the orange-tinted sky. Litta went up to the tall windows and, clinging to the curtains, gazed out on the immensity of sea and sky. A long way down below to the right the red roofs of

Théoule still held the last of the sunset's glow, and way out to sea a tiny craft, turned portwards, was gently balanced by the evening breeze Somewhere down in the terraced garden a labourer at work was singing in a warm southern voice a song of far-off Sicily

The Celestial City *VI*

LITTA dropped the curtain; a slight shiver ran down her spine. It seemed as if she had been wandering for a moment in a land of dreams, and had very suddenly come down to earth again. With a nervous little laugh she came back to Gabrielle's side and, kneeling down beside her, took hold of those kind hands which had so often, with their gentle touch, smoothed her defiant or rebellious moods.

"Darling," she said softly, "do forgive me. Here have I been talking about my own wretched self when you are in such trouble and such difficulties. There is a lot more I want to ask you——"

But Gabrielle Bobrinsky was no longer in a mood to talk. On the eve of this wonderful adventure on which she was about to embark, she and her friend had exchanged confidences in a manner they had never done before As for her own determination to go and seek out her husband, together with the fortune which was to purchase his freedom, she knew that nothing would make her swerve from it, and she was not a woman to

waste time in useless arguments. Litta disapproved, but Litta was young and inexperienced; and Litta would try to dissuade, whilst Gabrielle was not prepared to yield.

"Could I let the chauffeur know now, darling?" she asked. "I ought to be getting back."

Curiously enough, Litta at once jumped to her feet, without any comment or protest whatever, and touched the bell. When the valet de chambre came in she ordered him to tell Princess Bobrinsky's chauffeur to come round at once.

"Shall I close the volets now, milady?" the valet asked.

"No, leave them," she replied, "and don't turn on the light. Just let the chauffeur know, will you?"

As soon as the man had gone, she turned back impulsively to her friend, and said:

"I am going to London with you anyway, you know?"

"My darling Litta——" Gabrielle tried to protest.

"I am—I am," Litta reiterated firmly. "I must see the last of you. I may never see you again, you see—and——" There was a little catch in her throat, so she couldn't go on. She swallowed hard, then said with a little forced smile:

"You'll have to write very often, you know."

"Of course I will, you dear, lovely thing. I wonder," Gabrielle added abruptly, "what made your parents call you Litta. Somehow it seems to suit you, but I've never heard the name before."

"It's not my real, proper name," Litta replied, tears and smiles still fighting for mastery. "I was actually christened Magdalen Agnes, but my father had a great friend who was an Italian, and when I was a wee tot, it seems that I was very, very wee, and this Italian friend always used to say about me, 'But she is so litta, litta,' meaning 'little,' of course, and somehow the name stuck to me. I was always Litta to my father and——"

She was going to say something more, but apparently thought better of it, and so for a moment or two that same stillness, which between these two intimate friends seemed so full of meaning, once more reigned around. It was quite dark now save for the tender glow thrown back through the windows by the marble balustrade of the terrace, and for the flickering firelight that crept up Litta's delicate outline and touched her shoulder, her hand, her hair, with gold. Out in the garden the Sicilian labourer's song was stilled, only a few sparrows twittered now in the old olive trees. Not a sound came up here from the busy life of tourists and pleasure-seekers down below. It seemed such a lovely home this half-château, half-farm, up on the heights, with its wonderful garden and glorious, perpetual sunshine, with its luxury within and active farm-life without, with everything, in fact, that should make for the happiness of imaginative souls. Yet in the woman's heart there was rebellion and discontent born of an unappeasable longing for the one thing that makes life worth while, for the love of mate for mate which turns an attic into a palace and transmutes everything that is drab into gold.

A discreet cough, the touch of a hand on the door, broke the spell of silence.

"Here's Phil, come to say good-bye to you," Litta said, and quickly dried the few insistent tears.

"You told him I was going away?"

"I think I did. I am not sure."

Sir Philip came in to answer the question himself.

"Litta tells me that you are going away," he said in his slow, even-toned way. "I am very sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"You are very kind, Sir Philip," Gabrielle replied. "There's nothing really that anyone can do for me. I am going to Russia, you know."

"So I understand. Beastly place," Sir Philip added with a dry, little laugh.

"I am going as far as London with Gabrielle, Phil," Litta now said coolly. "I'll leave everything all right for you in the house."

"You'll be back soon?" was all the comment he made on the announcement.

"I think so. But anyway I shall stay to see the last of her. I imagine that you'll get on all right in the meanwhile without me"

"Is there any reason," Sir Philip put in quietly, "why we should discuss the question in the dark?"

And without waiting for permission from the ladies, he switched on the light. Tempered though it was by soft gold-tinted shades, it struck almost garishly on Litta's chestnut hair and sapphire-blue frock, as well as on Gabrielle's pale face and dull black gown. Both the women blinked in the sudden light.

"It was so lovely in the dark," Litta sighed, "and I don't feel I am looking my best."

"Shall I turn the light off again?" her husband asked good-humouredly.

"No! no! for goodness' sake leave it alone. Gabrielle is going. Will you see her to her car?"

Then she turned to her friend and there were some fond adieus.

"I shall pick up my sleeper at Cannes," she said "I suppose I shall be able to get one. If I can't, I'll go by the ordinary Rapide. In any case, I'll be at Claridge's on Wednesday; if we haven't met before, come and dine with me"

Sir Philip stood by, a gentle, rather awkward smile on his lips, but otherwise seemingly indifferent to his wife's arrangements for her journey. He escorted the Princess to her car, said the usual platitude about a pleasant journey and speedy return.

When he returned to the drawing-room he found his wife sitting by the fire.

"I am sorry the Princess has to go to Russia," he said—"beastly hole, I believe. What makes her want to go? Do you know?"

"Phil," Litta retorted with abrupt irrelevance, "how did you know that Gabrielle was going to Russia I never told you"

"Didn't you, my d——, I mean didn't you? Then I suppose I must have overheard—unconsciously."

"Not unconsciously," she retorted drily; "you were listening"

"Not I I can assure you that Princess

Bobrinsky's comings and goings are not of very great importance to me"

With that he took up *The Times*, and Litta with a dispirited little sigh went out of the room.

The Celestial City VII

LADY CHARTLEY had not been able to secure a sleeper on the Train Bleu, and when she arrived at Claridge's on the Wednesday evening she found Princess Bobrinsky waiting for her in the hall.

"I didn't have dinner on the train," she said, "as I knew you would be waiting. Let's have something light to eat, and then a good talk."

It was not until after dinner that the two women got into intimate conversation. Gabrielle went up with Litta into her sitting-room, and there, beside a cosy fire, fortified with cigarettes and coffee, they once more talked over the whole question of Princess Bobrinsky's journey. It was strange how very set against it Lady Chartley was: she was certainly young and inexperienced, and her opinions would not carry a great deal of weight, and yet she fought against her friend's resolution as if she actually had a say in Gabrielle's destiny.

"I can't make you out, darling," Gabrielle said at one time, struck, in spite of herself, by Litta's vehemence and strange obstinacy. "You must know that whatever you may say won't make me alter my mind. I am absolutely convinced that my Cyril wants me, and I am going. Besides, dear, you really don't know anything about Russia.

You mustn't take everything you hear as gospel-truth There has been an awful lot of exaggeration about the whole thing."

Litta nodded. "I know all that," she said, "and I suppose that it is just awful cheek on my part to try to dissuade you. But I can't help it. Every time I think of your going, something seems to compel me to make an effort to prevent you. I feel," she went on, turning to gaze into the glowing coal, so different from the fantastically twisted olive logs of her home in the South—"I feel as if a great, relentless Destiny was weaving mysterious threads to lead us both—you and me—into the unknown."

"You funny girl! Of course Destiny is weaving her thread, but not for you—for me. She is leading me into the unknown certainly, but into a glorious unknown where Cyril is waiting for me, and where I can be of service to him."

But Litta obstinately shook her head

"I don't mean that altogether," she said.

The conversation drifted on to more practical channels· money, of which Princess Bobrinsky seemed to have sufficient for her needs—arrangements for the journey, which were in Cook's hands—passports and visas, which the ubiquitous and mysterious Paul Sergine had undertaken to have ready by the next day.

"I start first thing on Friday morning," Gabrielle said, "and Paul will bring me my passport and all the papers I want to my hotel the last thing to-morrow evening"

"Your hotel? Aren't you staying in your flat?"

"No; I have fortunately let it, and I hope I have got rid of the lease. Hardacre, the house-agent, is coming to see me about it to-morrow. In the meanwhile I am staying at the Beausite in Knightsbridge."

"You'll let me come and see this wonderful Sergine to-morrow?" Litta pleaded.

"Of course! In any case, you must come the last thing to say good-bye. But you must not let Paul see you. He has begged and implored me to keep his identity and his personality an absolute secret. He is terrified now that he has made up his mind to accompany me——"

"To accompany you?" Litta exclaimed. "This—this man is going with you?"

"Yes! Most fortunately he was chosen to take some letters through to Moscow which his chief did not want to send through the post. He really ought to have started to-day, but at very great personal risk he is waiting another twenty-four hours in order to travel with me."

"He is a wonderful man for taking personal risks," Litta remarked drily

But for once Gabrielle lost patience.

"My dear, you are impossible," she said "Everything I say you twist into an argument against me. It was awfully sweet of you, of course, to come to London, but if we are going to argue all the time, when my mind is irrevocably made up once and for all, it would have been better if——"

But already Litta, impulsive, loving, anxious, was on her knees beside her, with fond arms encircling her friend:

"Forgive me, dear," she begged—"forgive me. I know I am stupid and ignorant and presumptuous, but do for one moment put yourself in my shoes. You are the one being in the world I cling to, you have been more than a friend to me, and you are going away on a journey which is positively bristling with danger to your life; you are going into a country which, whatever you may say, has become infamous in the eyes of the world for lawlessness, injustice, and cruelty; you are going on an adventure which, to say the least, is—well! more romantic, shall we say, than practical, and now you tell me that you are going in the company of a man whom I don't know, whom I have never seen——"

"You are going to see him to-morrow," Gabrielle broke in with her gentle, indulgent smile.

"Will you promise me," Litta pleaded with desperate earnestness, "that if I don't like the look of him, you won't start"

Gabrielle couldn't help laughing at that

"My dear," she said, "I could not possibly promise such a thing You would scarcely be looking at my poor Paul with an unprejudiced eye, would you?"

"I assure you," Litta insisted earnestly, "that I'll be perfectly fair."

But Gabrielle, still laughing, shook her head, and Litta then went on: "Well, then, promise me that if I don't like the look of Paul Sergine you'll let me come with you"

"Now you are talking like a child, Litta," Gabrielle rejoined with as much tartness as her gentle nature was capable of. "I have already

explained to you at full length the reasons why I could not possibly think of taking you with me; to these reasons we must now add the supreme one that you could not possibly get your passport visaed in time. I start early on Friday morning," she added, with the stolidity of a stone wall. "Nothing can or will deter me. Take this as my last word, my darling, and don't let us argue any more. If you love me, stop arguing. Give me a good kiss and I'll get along. The porter will get me a taxi, and you go straight to bed, there's a dear."

And so the discussion ended. Litta saw at last that there was indeed nothing to be done. She had done her utmost, and more would only have wearied and perhaps irritated her friend The two women took leave of one another, and through the night Litta was haunted with nightmares, seeing Gabrielle arrested on the Russian frontier, the mysterious Paul Sergine standing like an executioner over her, Gabrielle thrown into prison, made to work as a convict on the road, yet contriving to send her friend in England frantic messages of appeal, begging her to come and seek out hidden treasures wherewith to drag her out of hell.

The Celestial City *VIII*

ALL day Litta had helped Gabrielle with her shopping and the preparations for her journey As the food at the small Beausite Hotel was very indifferent, the two of them had dined together

at the Monico, and at about nine o'clock returned to the hotel.

Of the two Litta was, of course, the most agitated. Her keen, nervous temperament was constantly chafed by Princess Bobrinsky's almost irritating placidity. Gabrielle thought that Sergine would probably turn up at about ten o'clock. She hoped to see the house-agent before then, about the lease of her flat. He had not been able to put the matter through earlier, as his client lived in the country, but he had promised to come round in the course of the evening. In the meanwhile Gabrielle busied herself with putting her personal treasures away in her dressing-case, and Litta watched her, for the most part in silence.

At five minutes to ten a page-boy came up to say that two gentlemen were downstairs asking to see the Princess Bobrinsky. The boy had a card on a tray which Gabrielle glanced at, and then told him to show the two gentlemen up into her sitting-room. Her apartment consisted of a small vestibule, sitting-room, bedroom, and bathroom; the sitting-room and bedroom did not communicate with one another, but both opened upon the little vestibule. Gabrielle, who, for the sake of peace, had yielded to her friend on the one point, told her to wait quietly in the bedroom until she heard obvious leave-taking, then to go and stand in the vestibule as if she had only just arrived, when she would see Paul Sergine, and the man who was with him, go out

"I wonder who this other man is," Gabrielle said, as soon as Litta had agreed to this arrange-

ment. "He must be a very intimate friend, as Paul was so desperately anxious that no one should know he was still in England."

A sharp retort and the usual dry comment hovered on Litta's lips, but all she said was:

"Well, I shan't be asleep, if you should want my help."

After which she settled down in an armchair and took up a magazine that was lying on the table. Gabrielle went out of the room, carefully closing the door behind her Two or three minutes later Litta heard the sound of heavy footsteps along the passage, the knocking at the door, the conventional "Come in" from Gabrielle, the opening and final shutting of the door, and the page-boy's retreating footsteps. After that only a confused murmur of voices, Gabrielle's from time to time, and the two men's voices merging into a kind of inarticulate hum. She strained her ears to catch even a word here and there, but the heavy furniture ranged along the dividing wall effectually deadened the clearness of every sound

Some ten minutes went by: Litta was growing impatient. She wondered why the business of handing over a passport took so long, and was vainly trying to hear the welcome sounds of leave-taking, but she heard nothing beyond the same confused murmuring, Gabrielle's voice and that of the two men. Then, suddenly there was a knock at the outside door: Gabrielle called "Come in!" and as she did so, she opened the sitting-room door and came out into the vestibule. Litta heard the voice of the page saying:

"Mr. Hardacre to see you, milady—he would like to speak to you a moment"

And Gabrielle saying in reply: "Ask him to wait in the lounge. I'll be down in a moment."

The boy then went away and Litta heard Gabrielle say, obviously to her two visitors:

"It is the house-agent about my flat. I must see him—I won't be long Will you wait?"

After which there came the closing of the sitting-room door and that of the vestibule, Gabrielle's retreating footsteps along the passage, then—for a few seconds—nothing more. Litta, whose patience had now worn down to a thread, could contain her curiosity no longer. Her quick, alert mind had already rehearsed the little scene which she now determined to enact. She would go into the vestibule, open and close the outer door rather noisily, as if she had just come in, then enter the sitting-room seemingly inadvertently, see the two men, and withdraw again with a hasty: "Oh! I beg your pardon, they told me Princess Bobrinsky was in her room!"

This would give her the chance of a good look at the two men

Given Litta's temperament, to formulate an idea and to carry it through was a matter of less than a minute She gathered her cloak round her, tiptoed to the vestibule, paused there for the fraction of a second in order to listen, then deliberately opened and shut the door. The men would think, she reflected, that it was the Princess coming back, they would be unprepared; she could accomplish her purpose in a very few seconds and set her impatience at rest. At this

point she had no other motive but that of satisfying her curiosity, and it was with a perfectly steady hand and an evenly beating heart that she opened the sitting-room door and took two or three steps into the room, before she threw a quick glance around.

The first thing she saw was Gabrielle's dressing-case on a side table, open, and two men's figures bending over it, but before a cry could escape her lips, one of the men had turned and faced her, and there was a pause—a moment of silence so tense that time itself appeared at a standstill and Litta's heart to cease its beating. And then the man said slowly:

"Hello, kid!"

The Celestial City IX

LITTA stood there on the threshold of that banal hotel room, immovable, unthinking, unconscious of everything save of that one face with the stubbly beard and the small twinkling eyes that had smiled at her in fondness, in care, or anxiety ever since she had been left a motherless babe.

All around her the world might be tottering, the trumpet of doom sounding, for all she knew or cared. She only saw that one face, and heard that one sound—so familiar—a voice out of the past:

"Hello, kid!"

How long the silence lasted after that she could not say, perhaps two seconds, perhaps an eternity.

Presently she caught herself murmuring mechanically.

"What are you doing here?"

But she knew—she knew! The other man had also turned and was looking at her—the Russian! the newly enrolled member of the gang of thieves of which her father—— She no longer saw the hotel room now; she saw the prison gates at Yeominster and herself in her cheap coat and skirt coming through them, her suit-case in her hand. "Hello, kid!" That was it—her father's greeting to her, after those eighteen months of hell. She saw herself walking over the bridge, entering the squalid house in Pierson Street; she heard the squealing of the sick child upstairs, the din of welcome when she entered the room where they were all assembled, Kilts, the Italiano, Mrs. Mason, the Russian.

She had fled from it all, sick at heart, longing passionately to forget the past, with money and jewels in her pocket, the proceeds of the gang's generosity towards her. "We wouldn't do the dirty on ye!" her father had said when he pressed the pearls into her hand and the draft for £40,000 on the banker in Amsterdam, and the ten golden sovereigns "for luck." And she had fled, longing passionately to forget. She saw herself, suit-case in hand, sneaking out of the house, hailing a passing taxi, arriving at the big station just in time for the first train to London She saw all the faces that had looked at her askance, and then broke into smiles when they met her eyes: the taximan when she offered him a golden sovereign, the man at the ticket office when she

put down two, and the reception clerk at the North-Eastern Hotel in London when he saw her small, shabby suit-case.

She had fled and at once started to forget: in Paris, in a whirl of shopping; on the Riviera Express, where first Gabrielle had smiled on her and taken her to her heart; in Monte Carlo, where André de Malsabre had made such passionate love to her, only to cast her aside like a toy that had become cumbersome. Oh! by that time she had forgotten—really forgotten. André de Malsabre and then Philip Chartley, love, humiliation, maddening joys and gnawing sorrows—all, all had helped to draw a veil over the past, to smother it in the soft folds of luxury, a contented life, friends, social success, a joyous present, and an assured future.

And now out of the grave of that buried past this voice: "Hello, kid!" and the kind, wistful smile that softened the hard face whenever the kid, the "litta" kid, was nigh

Was this vision of the past a second's flash or had æons gone by since she had entered this room? The Russian, too, had looked up and said in a strange, half-fearful voice, "Why, if it isn't the kid!" And then her father—still with that wistful smile round his thick, sensuous lips—came slowly towards her, and she stepped back, instinctively, with eyes fixed upon his face, her hands outstretched as if to ward off something awful, terrible, which she feared but did not comprehend

"You ain't frightened of me, kid, are ye?" her father said, and his rough voice was forced down to tones of gentleness, of pleading—of

humble, pathetic pleading for some sign of affection, however slight, some sign of pleasure at seeing him again. She murmured a hurried "No! no!" and then the Russian broke in drily

"Can't you see she's a lady, Bill? and she's afraid we are going to give her away?"

"Is that it, kid?" Bill rejoined, almost with a sigh of relief. That sort of fear seemed to him easy to understand—the fear of being found out, shown up; he had experienced that sort of fear himself, and he understood And then it didn't hurt so much as the thought that she was afraid of *him*, personally—afraid that he would hurt her, strike her perhaps, because she had run away and hidden herself all this long while. Wistfulness gave way to a kind of awkward swagger:

"So that's it, kid, is it?" he said "You're a lady now. I see you got a wedding ring on. You ain't married, are ye?" he added naïvely

Then at last Litta found her voice again; life returned to her limbs, sight to her eyes. The present stood there clear and uncompromising: the hotel room, Gabrielle, Philip—oh! Philip above all; but the past still hovered ghost-like, menacing and threatening her and her future, and threatening Gabrielle. Litta nerved herself for the conflict. It would be, she knew, a tussle of will between this present that insisted and that past which beckoned But the present must win: it *must*, or she and Gabrielle and Philip would be overwhelmed in a cataclysm so stupendous that the hell of a Russian prison would beside it seem like an Elysian field

"Yes!" she said slo[illegible]

and hard from her parched throat. "I am married, but there is no time to talk about that now. I have asked you what you are doing here."

She pointed to the dressing-case, to which neither her father nor the Russian was paying any more attention.

"Oh! we're not doing anything with that," Bill said with an indifferent shrug. "There's nothing much in it. Me and my mate only thought we'd have a look. Question of habit, you know, kid But I'll tell you what," he went on with a sly wink, "we've got a splendid bit of business on hand. We're all of us in it; but there's thousands in the business, kid, I tell ye—thousands!"

"Yes, I know," Litta said "That is—I know something—but I want to know more. Tell me?"

"It's jewels, kid," her father replied and rubbed his hands gleefully together. "Wonderful jewels! lots of 'em! and no risks! Not like that time in Yeominster, eh? No risks, I tell ye, and thousands! Sergine put us up to it—you remember Sergine? You didn't know him by name, perhaps, but you must remember him"

And Sergine, with that same appraising look which he had bestowed on her that day when she came out of prison, came forward and put out a long, thin hand.

"Pleased to meet you again," he said

"There's no time," she broke in hurriedly, glad of the excuse for not taking that outstretched hand—"there's no time. The Princess will be back. What is your scheme?" she went on peremptorily. "Tell me, quickly."

Bill thrust his hands into the pockets of his trousers, and swaggering nearer to her, he said, looking her straight in the eyes:

"The Princess Bobrinsky is going to Russia to look for her jewels, and Paul here is going with her."

"And when she has found her jewels, you are going to take them from her?"

"That's about the size of it, kid"

"You know that she wants her jewels in order to bribe those Russian devils to let her husband out of prison?"

"That's all right, kid," Bill retorted with a grin; "there ain't any husband, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"There ain't no husband," he reiterated with a shrug; "he's been dead these two years!"

A cry of horror, of loathing, rose to Litta's throat. With difficulty she checked it, kept control over her nerves and herself from pouring forth the full vials of her indignation against these two inhuman wretches who talked so lightly of this monstrous plot—talked of it and had planned its execution. And one of them her father! Great God above, her father! The kind old father whom she had loved, to whom her baby hands had so often been outstretched when she was sad or gay, who had cuddled her to sleep more tenderly than any mother could have done, who, when she was sick, had watched over her, for days and nights, untiringly, lovingly, with sublime unselfishness

It couldn't be—it couldn't! Such things didn't happen! It couldn't be!—couldn't. It was all

just a nightmare, a mistake—a horrible, ghastly mistake. The poor old man had been deluded, his easy nature preyed upon by that evil influence—the Russian who had planned the whole thing. Just a few words—a few quiet words—and he would see the abominable plot in its true light—he would see it—he would understand. All Litta had to do was to explain it all to him, to show him the truth. It was no use brusquing him, no use turning on him—he had always been queer when one did that; but she, Litta, could do anything with him in the old days, with just a smile and an appealing look

In the old days! Oh God in heaven, help us!

So after a while—was it really only a moment or two, or had it been a slice out of eternity?—she forced herself into a smile and a lightness of tone, and then she said:

"Oh! I see! Prince Bobrinsky is dead?" And when her father nodded sagely, she went on: "Anyhow, his being alive or dead hasn't anything to do with the case, as you are not going through with this Russian affair, as you call it."

"Not going through——?" the old man began, then checked an oath and finally added: "what do you mean?"

The Russian had made no comment. All he did was to hum an old tune out of the *Mikado:*

"*The flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la,*
Have nothing to do with the case."

"I mean," Litta went on with utmost patience, so as not to ruffle the old man, yet conscious of the flight of time and Gabrielle's possible return be-

fore she had finished to explain—"I mean that presently, when the Princess comes back, you are going to tell her that her papers are not quite in order—or anything else you choose—anyway, that she can't possibly start to-morrow morning Then to-morrow I can break the news to her quite gently and explain to her that——"

But she could not go on in this same, even tone, because her father, with his hands still in his pockets, had stepped close up to her, so close that an overpowering reek of spirits and stale tobacco made her feel quite dizzy. She tried to get away from him, but couldn't because already she was up against a piece of furniture with her back bent painfully over its edge

"Oh!" he said slowly, the wistfulness of his tone giving place to a kind of good-humoured sarcasm, "I am going to say all that to the Princess, am I?"

She nodded, still trying to smile.

"And p'r'aps you'll tell me, kid, why I should say those things to the Princess"

"Because, father, Princess Bobrinsky is my friend, the only friend I've got in the world, and because to have raised her hopes by telling her that her husband, whom she loved passionately, is still alive, is the most cruel blow any human being can inflict upon another. You didn't know that, did you, father?" she went on, pleading just like she used to do when as a child she wanted something very badly. "You didn't realise how terribly you were making that dear innocent woman suffer, and what a death-blow it will be to her when she realises that her husband is dead"

"She's been through that once before," Bill rejoined with a shrug and a light laugh; "she's used to hearing that her husband is dead."

"She never knew what became of her husband, and now this hope has made another woman of her. She is just ready to go through anything, to risk anything, because she believes that she is going to drag him out of hell, by purchasing his freedom with those jewels"

"Well, she ain't going to get him out of any hell, but she is going to show us where her jewels, worth £200,000 in solid money, are hidden And as the lady is a friend of yours, I'll see that she has a nice little share for herself and, if it can be managed, she shall come back to England to enjoy it."

And he looked round at his mate half in triumph at this subtle form of diplomacy and half in apology for this concession made to the kid because of her attachment to the Princess Bobrinsky. But Litta slowly shook her head.

"It's no use, father," she said.

"How do you mean, no use?"

"You are going to give up that Russian affair altogether," she went on firmly, "for if you don't——"

"Well?" he asked, seeing that she had paused and that her luminous eyes were fixed resolutely on his face. "If I don't? What?"

"Then I'll tell the truth to the Princess myself."

At which the Russian laughed and Bill shook his broad shoulders

"Tell her what? That her husband is dead? She won't believe you now. That she's only go-

ing to show us where her jewels are, and that she's never to have the handling of them? She won't believe that either."

"I can warn her that she has fallen into the hands of thieves," Litta retorted impulsively.

But again the old man laughed. "What?" he said. "Tell her that Paul, her dear Paul, who has brought her that heavenly news, is nothing but a thief? You try it on, kid! She'll only laugh at you"

"There's going to be a way," Litta retorted. "I'll make her believe. I won't let her fall into your hands," she reiterated obstinately. "I won't—I won't. I'll find a way to make her believe."

But Bill, with his habitual indifferent shrug, simply rejoined: "Try it, kid—try it. She won't believe you; not now. She's got it on the brain, I tell yer. She won't listen to you, I say."

"She will," Litta broke in defiantly, "when I tell her——"

"What?" the old man snapped, no longer indifferent now, but snarling like an old dog that has been teased out of its sleep. "What'll you tell her, kid? That you know the whole thing is a trap and a lie and a fraud because your own father's got a hand in it? Is that the argument you are going to use to make your best friend believe that what you say is true?"

Litta threw back her head with an air of intrepidity, confronting the old man's savage glance with the firmness of her own.

"I'd sooner do that," she said boldly, "than let her fall into your abominable trap."

Bill, who for the last few moments had been

moving restlessly about the room, in the intervals of facing his daughter with more or less indifference—Bill came to a sudden halt at her words. And for the space of a few seconds a dull, ominous silence fell between those three—those two men and this young woman—who were battling for the life of a fellow-creature. The hubbub of London life came only as a distant rumbling sound—like a fateful accompaniment to this silence full of portent, or like the roll of muffled drums in the wake of the dead. Father and daughter were looking at one another, eye to eye and soul to soul, measuring one another's strength like two fighters in the interval of some mortal combat. Father and daughter! He, awkward of gait and rough of mien, yet something in him that proclaimed degenerate blood rather than vulgar herd, strong of will, unbridled of passion rather than coarse of fibre, but tenacious and savage—possibly brutal when thwarted. And she, the delicate twig born of the gnarled branch, whom unerring feminine instinct had moulded into refinement, inherited no doubt from some far-off, unsuspected ancestor—she to whom the father had bequeathed nothing but iron will, and a blind loyalty toward a pal.

And in the background the wily, smooth-tongued Russian, shrewd and unscrupulous, the head that directed, the hand that guided, the tongue that had brought lying to a fine art. He stood apart from the others, gazing at them both, his thin, claw-like hand gently stroking his chin. For twenty seconds did that silence last while father and daughter measured one another's strength, and the smooth-tongued Russian gently

stroked his chin and meditated. Then Bill slowly drew something out of his hip-pocket, and kept it lying in the palm of his hand. It was a small automatic.

"Do you see this, kid?" he asked; and she, fascinated, but unafraid, looked down upon the weapon "Now," he went on, "let me tell you this. My mates and I are down and out. We've brought nothing off for over two years, and very little since you left us five years back. Down and out, that's what we are. All we've got left in the world we've put into this business Not me alone, you understand? For myself, I don't suppose I should care much. But me and my mates are all in it, and if it don't come off, then it's the end of all things, and this little thing in my hand," he added, and with his left palm he gently stroked the small automatic, "is the only remedy for what would follow. See, kid? You understand me, don't you?"

And Litta, her eyes still fixed on the little thing in his hand, nodded like an automaton.

"You always was an intelligent kid," her father rejoined drily. "And you'll also get my meaning when I tell you that if this Russian business don't come off, there'll be nothing for me left but this little thing. See? And mind, kid, you know me I never did say I'd do a thing and then not do it. Did I?"

And as Litta, motionless and mute, had not made the slightest sign of comprehension, he reiterated more loudly

"Did I?"

And slowly she shook her head.

Only a few minutes ago she thought she had probed misery and humiliation to their very depths, when she realised that her father was a party to one of the most hideous conspiracies ever perpetrated on a defenceless woman. But in that same cup of misery there was a slight admixture of hope. The fact that her father was in this atrocious plot made her at once envisage the possibility of saving her friend She knew that she was the one affection of his life, she was conscious of her persuasive powers, and until this moment it had never entered her head that she could fail. Not until this moment when she saw her father turning away quietly from her with the little thing still held lightly in his hand, and throw himself down in the nearest armchair. She watched him fascinated, enthralled, her senses numb with the vista of possibilities which unfolded itself slowly before her. She couldn't speak; the cry of horror, of entreaty, of indignation, that struggled for expression was choked in her throat. Mechanically she looked down on her own hands, and a stupid, monotonous thought started hammering away in her brain: "He has tied your hands! You can't do anything; he has tied your hands!" And if she tried to think, to see things clearly, to find a way out of this appalling labyrinth of horror, the thought would bubble up again, persistent and monotonous: "He has tied your hands; you can do nothing."

And then she stood for what seemed æons of time leaning against the heavy piece of furniture, feeling herself swaying first, and then falling, falling down into the depths of desolation with

hands tied and her father holding a small black thing before her eyes—a small thing with which he toyed alternately, and alternately raised up to his mouth. Æons of time while the world seemed to stand still, and even the distant rumble of London life was at rest And slowly, one by one, the sounds around her took form and struck her numbed senses: she heard the rattle of a heavy lorry thundering down Knightsbridge, a motor horn, and then another, and a shrill voice calling out the latest news in the evening papers; and through it—suddenly—a footstep along the corridor, coming rapidly this way—Gabrielle!

The Celestial City X

GABRIELLE! and no time in which to think, in which to weigh the awful alternative: the life of her friend or that of her father! It seemed as if every one of those soft footsteps out there in the corridor were a stab that would presently be the final stab of death. Her father, having said just what he wanted, was sitting—indifferent apparently, as if he had forgotten her, at the farther end of the room he and the Russian were whispering inaudibly to one another. He didn't look at her, but the Russian's eyes, quick and furtive, would now and then glance up and, in a flash, seem to search her soul.

Another ten seconds, five perhaps, and Gabrielle would be here, and the decision would have to be made—now—now—before she had time to think.

Another five seconds—another two—and the footsteps were past the door, retreated farther and farther, then died away altogether down the long corridor. It was a respite, but the imminence was still there—the decision—the alternative. Litta with parched throat and burning eyes caught herself praying—praying ardently—praying as she had never prayed before, for some awful, terrible cataclysm, an avalanche, an earthquake, a thunderbolt, anything stupendous, that would for ever relieve her from the burden of this decision.

Her father's life, or Gabrielle's! And he was still stroking, almost lovingly, the little thing in his hand, not looking at her, but just stroking it, stroking, because, as he said, the little thing was the only remedy for what would follow if the Russian affair happened to fail—if she, his daughter, happened to save the life of her friend at the expense of his.

And now the Russian's voice struck suddenly on her ear, in soft, mellifluous tones with the sing-song intonation peculiar to his race.

"Don't worry the kid to-night, Bill," he said. "There's no hurry for twenty-four hours. Let her think it over—I can arrange about the passports"

To Litta it seemed like a voice from heaven. Salvation had come from the quarter whence she least expected it. A delay! That is what she understood out of that flow of mellifluous tones. A delay! Time in which to think! A delay in coming to a decision! Twenty-four hours? If God had a mind He could reconstruct the world

in twenty-four hours and give her, Litta, time to think and counsel how to act. She felt as if she had had a terrific fall from some giddy height, and, thinking herself dead, was slowly awakening to the fact that she was only bruised and shaken, but alive for all that. A moment ago everything had been darkness around her; but now she could see See! She hardly heard what her father said in reply, but he seemed to acquiesce. Yes! he acquiesced. He listened, nodding his head at intervals to the Russian, who went on talking for a moment or two in whispers, then rose and came up to her. He came close, very close Under ordinary circumstances Litta would have resented this proximity; there was something about this man which had repelled her, even on that memorable day five years ago when she had first seen him in the squalid house in Pierson Street. She hated the odour of stale tobacco which clung to his garments, the stains of nicotine on his fingers, the look that darted now and again out of his almond-shaped eyes. But now!—now! She looked upon him as a heaven-sent messenger who had brought her that inestimable boon—delay! and when he approached she tried to put into her eyes all the gratitude, the relief that she felt.

"Isn't that it, kid?" he said gently, his stained fingers twirling a cigarette. "You don't want to do things in a hurry. You want to think things over, don't you?"

She nodded; her eyes shining with the first tears she had been able to shed.

"Well, as I was saying to Bill, there's no

immediate hurry. I'll just explain quietly to Princess Bobrinsky that there's a bit of a hitch about her passport, but that everything will be put right to-morrow. That'll give you just twenty-four hours to think everything over quite quietly. I don't want to influence you one way or another, but I see that Bill has scared you a bit, and we none of us want you to do something when you are scared which you'd p'r'aps regret for the rest of your life"

He looked down on the cigarette and with the tip of his little finger flicked off the ash, then added softly: "I am too fond of you, kid, to let you do that."

Then he turned on his heel, went back to speak to her father, without waiting to catch the look of gratitude which shone out of her luminous eyes. And Litta, gathering her cloak about her, tiptoed out of the room.

Out of the room, through the outside door, and then along the corridor she sped. Delay she had; peace she wanted now—the peace and darkness and loneliness of the night in which to think.

She ran down the corridor and down the stairs, disdaining the lift. Just as she came to the foot of the stairs she saw Gabrielle standing in the hall shaking hands with a dapper little man who wore spats and had a bald head, obviously taking leave.

The Russian had intervened just in time.

Gabrielle saw her and, with a last quick word to the dapper little man who wore spats, she turned and caught Litta by the hands.

"Litta, what is it?" she asked. "You are not going?"

"Yes! yes!" Litta replied, speaking very quickly and jerkily. "I am so tired—ever so tired. I had a peep at your man. Run up to them, darling. They are getting so impatient."

Gabrielle frowned, vaguely puzzled.

"You haven't said good-bye to me yet," she said reproachfully.

"Oh yes!—that is—no, I mean," she added, and threw impulsive arms round her friend's shoulders "I am coming to see you off in the morning. I'll only say 'good night' now"

There was no one else in the hall, and she gave Gabrielle a close, affectionate hug, and kissed her long and tenderly on both eyes. Gabrielle, a little bewildered, still vaguely puzzled, freed herself from those dear, clinging arms.

"But I start so early in the morning," she urged, smiling

"Never mind—never mind," Litta responded, swallowing a sob. "I'll see you in the morning. Good night!"

Then she turned and ran across the hall. The dapper little man was still there, getting his hat and coat. Litta thought he looked so funny—so trim in his spats and patent leather boots, and trousers immaculately creased and straight down his little legs. She smothered an inclination to laugh, knowing well that if she started laughing, she would go on, and laugh, laugh until her heart broke under its heavy load of misery. She steadied her voice in order to tell the hall-porter to get her a taxi. The dapper little [illegible] ems,

had already ordered one for himself, but he was so well-mannered that when the first taxi came up, he insisted on Litta getting into it, and declared that he would gladly wait till another came up. The last that Litta remembered of her fateful visit to the Beausite Hotel was seeing Mr. Hardacre standing, hat in hand, in the hotel porch, the light from above making a brilliant patch on the top of his bald head.

AND all night through, without sleep, Litta thought and prayed and wept. The hours were as one long eternity. Who shall dare lift the veil that clothes a soul in anguish?

She felt her utter loneliness. No one to whom she could appeal. No one who would help or advise Motherless, brought up by a father who was utterly devoid of moral sense, Litta had never learned how to turn to Him Who spoke those supreme words of comfort to poor, suffering, groping humanity, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" Her prayers were either vague babblings that tore at her heart and gave her no surcease from pain or mad railings against the cruelty of God for putting such a burden upon her. What had she done that she should suffer so? And only vaguely did her thoughts fly from time to time to the husband far away, who meant so

little, if anything at all, to her. If he had ever loved her, that love was long since gone; not even the breath of angels could kindle those dead ashes into a flame that would warm her starved and frozen heart.

Neither her God nor her husband did she know. To neither had she ever turned in distress or in pain; the love of God or man is fed just as much on grief as on joy, and sorrow forges more lasting bonds than pleasure. Litta was alone, and loneliness was her greatest burden during this night of wakefulness peopled with horror, with mocking voices, and cruel fingers pointing at her distress.

All night through, without sleep, Litta pondered.

At eight o'clock, slightly refreshed with a bath and a cup of strong coffee, she sallied forth to meet Gabrielle. Her mind was made up. After an eternity of perplexity it was made up. The innocent should not suffer for the guilty, whatever might be the consequences The threats of a man brought to bay through his own crimes—even though that man was her own father—should not stand in the way of justice and of truth. And Litta had made up her mind to tell the truth to Gabrielle. Whatever the consequences might be, that truth must be told. At what precise hour of the night or the morning this conviction had come upon her, Litta did not know. But it had come, and her mind was made up. Whilst she dressed, she rehearsed just what she would say. She felt no humiliation at the thought that her friend, high-born, refined, gentle, would know that she, Litta, was the daughter of a criminal and had

spent eighteen months of her short life in prison. That she did not mind. It was a burden easy to bear, and she would lay it at Gabrielle's feet and trust to Gabrielle's fondness and sympathy. As for the rest, she would not think of it. All she knew was that her father had *not* tied her hands, that she was free to speak the truth as the long, sleepless night had counselled her to do.

And while she sped along to the Beausite in the taxi, she tried to visualise the scene as it would be when she told Gabrielle. She would find Gabrielle already disappointed, nervy and anxious because of the delay in starting which the Russian had invented. Then would come the full force of the blow which Litta would deal her, the knowledge that her husband was not alive, that the journey in search of buried treasure would not only be dangerous but useless and futile. And Litta's heart ached for her friend in a way it had not ached all through the past sleepless night, when her own inevitable sorrow stood as a doom before her. Litta's heart ached for Gabrielle as it had not ached for her own self. For herself now she felt nothing—neither grief nor horror nor anxiety. All she longed for was to get over the next half-hour; after that—well, there were ways, it seemed, of deadening grief and getting rid of pain. Even her father had thought of a way of getting out of squalor and misery if the Russian affair failed.

As she got out of the taxi, she noticed for the first time that it was raining and that it was cold Her maid, fortunately, had insisted on her wearing her fur-coat. Wrapping it closely round

her, she paid her fare and went into the hotel. The hall wore that air of desolation peculiar to places where men congregate in numbers, when those places are empty. The chairs were turned over with their legs in the air, looking like gaunt arms stretched out in desolation. A woman, with her body swathed in coarse sacking, was on her hands and knees scrubbing the tessellated floor; at some little distance farther on an old man with a white beard was giving some attenuated palm leaves a morning bath; whilst a page-boy, with tousled hair and eyes still heavy with sleep, ran across the foyer, then disappeared through the service door.

Litta took in all these details while the hall-porter came across from his box to speak to her She asked to be taken up to the Princess Bobrinsky's room.

"The Princess Bobrinsky left for abroad an hour ago, madam. What name did you say?"

But Litta did not understand what the man said She asked stupidly: "What did you say?"

"The Princess Bobrinsky left an hour ago, madam," the hall-porter reiterated. "Is it Lady Chartley?"

"Yes," Litta said with a touch of impatience, "I am Lady Chartley. I'll take the lift up to the Princess Bobrinsky's rooms—I suppose it is working at this hour."

And for the third time the hall-porter reiterated quite deferentially, though raising his voice a little because he thought that the lady was deaf

"The Princess Bobrinsky left for abroad an hour ago, my lady."

Then he went back to his box, leaving Litta standing there in the hall, watching, with unconscious, unseeing eyes, the old man with the white beard giving the palm trees their morning bath. When the hall-porter came back with a letter which he handed to her, she gazed at him as if he were some kind of abnormal, superhuman creature, something she had never in her life seen before. She kept her eyes fixed on him whilst she raised her hand like an automaton and took the letter from him. The man said afterwards that he thought her ladyship was daft as well as deaf. He offered her a chair, and ordered the charwoman to cease her scrubbing for the moment. The woman struggled to her feet, picked up her pail and waddled off, whilst Litta, still moving like an automatic figure that has been wound up, sat down and tore open the envelope.

It was just a short note from Gabrielle, which began "My darling Litta," and contained only a few lines.

> "Forgive me for not waiting to say good-bye. I thought it best not, and owing to its being summer-time abroad and still winter-time in England, my train from Harwich starts an hour earlier than I thought. Fortunately Sergine reminded me of this, or I should have missed the train altogether. But apart from that I felt that it would be kinder to spare you a scene of farewell. I know just how you feel, my darling, and I love you for your love of me and for your anxiety on my behalf. But promise me you won't fret. I'll write as often

as I can. Always remember, dear, that as far as my own feelings are concerned, Cyril has called to me and only death could stop me from going to him.

"Yr ever loving friend,
"GABRIELLE BOBRINSKY."

The Celestial City XII

How does one get on with life after a blow like that? How does one move and breathe and feel? Oh, feel! How does one think? Litta couldn't have told you. Though she went through it all, she couldn't have told you. At one moment she felt as if she were sinking into the beneficent arms of death, at another that some hideous devils were standing over her and shouting: "You've got to live! You've got to live, and go through with it! See your friend murdered by your father, through his doing, anyway! He planned it, he'll benefit by it, and she'll either die or lose her reason in the cataclysm! and you've got to live and see it through. You are helpless and alone! There's no one in whom you can confide! no one who will help or advise!"

And the devils shouted and laughed! Laughed because this was hell, and she was deep down in it They forced her to live and to move, though they had not the power to make her think. She just moved like an automaton; told the porter to get her a taxi—drove back to Claridge's—even

contrived to pay her fare and to ask at the desk if there were any letters for her, without attracting serious attention. But when the reception-clerk told her that Sir Philip Chartley was upstairs in her sitting-room, she failed to control the gasp which rose to her throat and which the clerk might interpret as he chose.

Litta was not prepared to meet her husband—not at this hour, when she was passing through such a devastating moral crisis that the presence of a dear friend would have been irksome, let alone that of a man who might have meant so much in her life, but now was less than nothing. No, she was not prepared to meet him, not until she had collected her thoughts a little and got complete control over her nerves. She murmured one or two inarticulate words and mechanically strolled into the lounge, which at this hour was solitary and almost peaceful, and sinking into a chair, ensconced behind a pillar, she set herself to think.

Philip! For the first time during her terrible moral conflict, she allowed her thoughts to dwell on him, and for the first time an overwhelming shame sent the blood up to her cheeks. Happily safe from prying eyes, she felt her face burning with that sense of shame. Shame! Never since that evening in Yeominster when first she embarked on her great adventure had the picture of the past stood out so clearly before her. The shameful past! her father! the gang! the police! those eighteen months in prison! this one picture of her life! And then the other: Sir Philip Chartley, Bart.! her husband! the bearer of an

historic name! an aristocrat to his finger-tips! the fount and guardian of his family honour! These two pictures in juxtaposition! the sordid story of her past life, like a page culled out of a halfpenny rag, and the stately Tudor home up in Rutlandshire where centuries-old cedars cast purple shadows on the lawns, and every mullion and every cornice bore a record of the blue blood of the Chartleys.

She had not thought of it all quite so vividly until this moment—when she was about to meet her husband, whose name and position she had stolen, not so much by a lie as by a suppression of the truth. In that first dawning of love in the sunny South, he had asked no questions and she had volunteered no information. Then came the catastrophe—André de Malsabre's treachery, and she, like a wounded bird, had cast herself into the loving arms so loyally, so trustfully held out to her. She ought to have spoken then, should have given loyalty for loyalty and trust for trust, but she had suffered so much humiliation at the hands of the one man whom she had trusted that she felt herself utterly unable to face the same ordeal again She had trusted André, told him everything, believing that the love which he had so ardently professed would ride gaily over the shoals of her past. With a smile that was almost a sneer, he had assured her that this was so, that his love remained more ardent than before, and that marriage being impossible he was only too ready to—— Oh! the humiliation! the sense of utter degradation, far worse than anything she had experienced at the hands of the police or the ward-

resses, or under the eyes of an indifferent crowd come to stare at her in the police-court.

She could not have gone through all that again. Never could she trust another man. She was quite sure of that. Quite sure. She thought at first that she would live her life in solitude, comforted by Gabrielle Bobrinsky's friendship, which had come down to her like manna from heaven, which asked for nothing, expected nothing save calm affection in return. And yet when, two days later, Philip Chartley at last gave expression to his love, she had not the strength of will to say "No!" The earnestness with which he spoke, the passion with which he assured her that all he desired in life was her happiness, had quickly broken down her resistance She was so young and, in spite of Gabrielle's friendship, she was so lonely, and she longed so passionately for this new life, with its refinement and its luxury, of which she had never even dreamed, that she had yielded and said "Yes!" to Philip Chartley. He knew, of course, of her love for André de Malsabre, everyone at Monte Carlo had known of it, had seen it develop, and perhaps anticipated the inevitable result; but whilst others shrugged their shoulders, smiled, and whispered, Philip had loved her well enough to wish only to console. He had offered her his name and friendship with the hope that that friendship would one day turn into love And she had accepted the pact, because she was little more than a child and was too weak to refuse He had asked no questions, and she had told him nothing, only that her people were humble in birth and condition, but he didn't care about that It

was her he wanted, not her people; it was herself he worshipped, not her ancestry. No! no! she couldn't tell him then. It was too beautiful to be worshipped like that! Besides, all men were beasts, and if she told Philip then, he might . . . like André . . . or else turn on her with contempt. Either way would have been terrible Litta felt at that moment that if Phil turned out to be like André, she would either kill him or herself; and if he turned on her with contempt, then there would be nothing left for her but to go back to the old life—to her father and the gang—with perhaps another term in prison in the end.

So she said nothing then. She stole his rank and name—that was mean, of course—it was doing the dirty on him perhaps; but she did it, meaning to be everything to him that he desired, his friend, his companion, his chum, a beautiful and gracious mistress to his household. And he had seemed entirely satisfied with that bond: he swore to her that he was satisfied just so long as she was happy and would allow him to take care of her. Of course, Phil was very different to André; he was unemotional, rather hard; Litta sometimes called him a prig to herself; but that was all to the good. Litta just then preferred to find a prig among the beasts. But later on there had come a time when she might have told him everything; when she might have trusted Love to rise triumphant over that sordid story which she would have to tell. She had watched, not altogether without a thrill, Love laying siege to that pact of friendship which should never have been exacted. Yes, she might have told Phil everything, that spring

at Santa Rosa on one of those moonlit evenings when he took her out for a row, and the sea was like a sheet of sapphire, the lights of the little town on the shore blinked like a hundred eyes as they receded, and from far away came the sound of a guitar and a warm Italian voice singing a dreamy love-song. And beneath the translucent sky, with the honey-coloured moon tipping every wavelet with diamonds, Litta had felt the warm blood rush up to her cheeks, because she had met Phil's eyes fixed upon her, right through that luminous darkness, which caressed her lips like a touch of velvet.

And there had been one evening when the scent of freesia was in the air, and they had strolled together arm-in-arm from the beach up to the little villa perched upon the hill in the midst of a garden of roses, and, in an old walnut tree close by, a nightingale was singing. It was springtime in Italy, and she might have told Phil everything, then. He would have understood everything, that night, and he would have forgiven everything.

But oh! it was so difficult. Everything was so beautiful and so peaceful. And Phil had called her his exquisite Madonna. Madonna, the name given to lilies, because they are so white, so pure and spotless. And then to come in the midst of that with a sordid story of thievish gangs, of burglaries, and prison life! . . . It was too difficult—too, too difficult a problem for Litta to tackle. And she had allowed the one glorious moment to go by—and neither Santa Rosa nor the indigo, starlit sky nor the murmur of waves on the pebbly beach could ever come back again.

The time had gone by, and Phil had become Sir Philip Chartley, Bart., with a magnificent ancestral home which he did not care to visit, a number of relations who had captured what affections he possessed, and no emotions save those caused by a good tomato crop or the promise of a successful vintage.

No! no! it had become impossible now.

The Celestial City XIII

A DISCREET cough roused Litta from her dream The reception-clerk, smiling, obsequious, was handing her a couple of letters and asking if her ladyship would take the lift. Moving mechanically, she caught herself wondering why Phil had come. Business, she supposed; and she was thankful that as he had to come to London he had not suggested or elected to travel with her. Phil, she owned, had many faults, but tactlessness was not one of them. But at this moment she felt intensely, unaccountably bitter towards him. Because she had deceived him, because she had stolen his name, his rank, his position, with pretty airs of mystery as to her own past adventures, she was conscious of that not very noble but absolutely human feeling of resentment against the very man whom she had wronged.

And yet when, a moment or two later, she entered her sitting-room and saw him sitting beside the fireless hearth, with the dull light of a rainy

London morning vaguely outlining his massive figure and his head with the smooth brown hair, she felt all at once intensely sorry for him. He sat with his elbows resting on his knees, his head buried in his hands, and there was something almost pathetic in the stoop of those powerful shoulders and the way his head was bowed between his hands

At the slight sound made by the closing of the door, Sir Philip raised his head, and seeing his wife he jumped to his feet.

"I hope," he said in his usual awkward way—"I hope you don't mind my coming up here and waiting for you."

"No, of course not," she replied rather nervously. "Why shouldn't you come up? I am only sorry there's no fire I'll have it lighted in a minute."

Her hand was on the bell, when he stopped her with a word.

"Please don't," he said hurriedly "That is—not on my account. I only came to ask if there was anything I could do for you while I was in London"

"When did you come?" she asked.

"Last night."

"Where are you staying, then?"

"At the Athenæum They couldn't give me a room here."

She knew that this was not true, but preferred to make no comment

"How long are you staying?"

"Only to-day I must get back to Pertuis as soon as I can."

"The strawberry plants, I suppose," she commented drily.

"Well, you know," he retorted good-humouredly, "Falicon would contrive to do the wrong thing with them somehow."

Then, as she said nothing in answer to that, he went on with a touch of his habitual awkwardness: "Is there anything I can do for you while I am in town? I am seeing Milbanke about some leases. If there is any business you want doing——"

"No, thanks very much. Nothing"

"For yourself or Princess Bobrinsky, I meant," he added

"Thank you," she replied slowly, "Gabrielle has gone"

"Oh!" he remarked coolly "I didn't know"

It was very, very difficult Litta felt tears of disappointment well up in her eyes. She hardly knew what vague hope surged up in her heart, in the wake of that feeling of pity which she had felt when she first entered the room and saw Phil sitting there looking almost as forlorn, as desolate as herself; but whatever it was, his rather gauche politeness and that air of detachment from everything except his own concerns which she so hated in him had already dealt it a severe blow. This was how most of their intercourse had been these past two years, and usually, at this stage, Litta would flounce out of the room, chilled as well as hurt, with a gibe directed at his favourite farming operations. But to-day she felt so desperate, so utterly lonely that even this frigid show of solicitude seemed better than nothing. After all,

he was her husband. He had sworn once that he would be her friend, that he would honour and cherish her, and it was his duty, now that she was in such deep distress, to comfort her, and, if necessary, to help. So when she caught him looking longingly at his hat and obviously only waiting for an opportunity to go, she said suddenly:

"Sit down a minute, Phil, will you?"

Obedient as always to her slightest wish, Sir Philip immediately sat down, and his face at once wore an air of polite interest.

She didn't know how to begin, and he, fortunately, helped her out.

"You are worried about the Princess Bobrinsky?" he asked.

"How did you guess?" she retorted.

"I didn't think you would take the trouble to speak to me about your own affairs."

"Is that intended for sarcasm?"

"Sarcasm?" he queried blandly. "Rather not. But you never do talk to me about your affairs, do you?"

"Well, we won't argue about that. It is about Gabrielle I wanted to talk to you. I am very worried, as you say."

"About her affairs?"

"About this journey of hers"

He made no comment on this; just a slight raising of the eyebrows indicative of surprise, and that was all.

"I don't know," Litta went on after a slight pause, "whether I have any right to tell you, but as a matter of fact she received a most extra-

ordinary communication which she firmly believes comes from her husband."

"I thought that she was a widow."

"So did she," Litta rejoined, "until the other day, when this amazing letter came. It was brought to her by a man—a Russian—who had been in her service before the war and who she declares has remained loyal to her. Prince Bobrinsky is supposed to have written this letter in prison. In it he asks Gabrielle to come to Russia and find some very valuable jewels which are deposited in a place known only to himself and to her. These jewels Gabrielle is to use as a bribe to purchase her husband's freedom."

"By Jove!" Philip exclaimed, when Litta paused, rather breathless with excitement, "what a romantic story, eh? But I am not surprised! The rummiest things happen in those God-forsaken countries over there. There was a fellow at the Club last night——"

"Phil!"

He had spoken, as a matter of fact, without looking at his wife, and with head thrown back staring vacantly up at the ceiling, as if the whole matter hardly interested him at all. But her sudden exclamation made him lower his head and he met those wonderful, expressive eyes of hers fixed on him with anything but approbation. Litta indeed was very near hating him at this moment, despising herself and him for having linked their destinies together. Two people who so entirely misunderstood one another! Fools! fools both! and she the worse of the two, because she fretted in her chains whilst he didn't care.

As soon as her eyes had conveyed to him something of what she felt, she turned them away very quickly, and so she did not see how Phil had suddenly clasped his hands together so tightly that the nails of each hand were buried in the flesh of the other, and the knuckles shone white, like ivory. But it was in his habitual cool, rather hesitating manner that he said:

"I only meant to tell you that this fellow knew of a case very similar. It turned out all right in the end."

"It can't in this case," Litta retorted almost fiercely.

"Why not?"

"Because the whole story is a conspiracy from beginning to end. Prince Bobrinsky is dead, and I know that Gabrielle is just being enticed to Russia so that she may disclose the whereabouts of the jewels, which are world-famous, it seems, and of immense value; and when she has done that, unwittingly of course, she will probably either be murdered outright or sent to a hellish prison, which would be worse"

Phil had listened very attentively while she poured out her story with ever-increasing vehemence. His eyes were fixed on her face, over which excitement had spread a crimson glow. How pretty she was! how full of vitality and generous impulses! How wonderful she would have been, if only she could have learned the lesson of love! How cruel she was now, when all she knew was to hate! When she paused in order to take breath, he asked coldly:

"How do you know all that?"

"What do you mean?"

"How do you know," he insisted, "that this fairy-tale you are telling me of conspiracies and I don't know what, is true?"

Then as she remained silent, thinking, with her great luminous eyes fixed on him, he insisted once more: "How do you know that Prince Bobrinsky is dead?"

It was a fateful moment Litta felt as if her whole destiny was in the balance. She was conscious of a strange, searching, almost compelling expression in Phil's eyes, which she had never seen in them before, and for the space of one horror-filled second she held her breath, and her heart almost stilled its beating, so agonising was the doubt that had entered it.

Did Phil know?

But the very next moment she dismissed the doubt It was impossible! Phil couldn't know. How could he? Those sordid stories of police-court proceedings interested no one but a few newspaper reporters, and fortunately her picture had never appeared in any of the illustrated papers Hers had not been a sensational case, and Yeominster was far, very far from London, or Rutlandshire and Phil's proud relations. No! no! Phil could not possibly know. If he had, she would have seen it, she would have guessed. She would have seen the mark of the beast through the outer covering of indifference, and contempt expressed through outward courtesy. Men did not keep such knowledge to themselves André de Malsabre had been a beast, Phil would have been a relentless judge, a taskmaster who would

have extracted from her every ounce of suffering, as a punishment for the lie with which she had stolen his name.

Oh no! Phil couldn't know. Even as she returned that curiously searching gaze of his, she felt the horrible doubt fading away, leaving her merely wondering why she had been so scared and what that strange expression in Phil's eyes had really meant. Already it had changed. In an undefinable way, but changed nevertheless, and Litta was sure that she had been dreaming when she feared that it had tried to probe into the depths of her soul. And there was her destiny still in the balance. Somewhere in the banal hotel room a soft, insistent voice kept on murmuring: "Tell the truth now! Tell it at any cost!"

At any cost? What did that mean?

It meant at the cost of galling humiliation, of self-abasement before a man who cared nothing for her, who would neither understand nor forgive. It meant at the cost of all her pride, that poor little bit of pride which was all that was left to her of the joy of life, with which she had embarked on her great adventure from Yeominster on that cold dreary night in March five years ago It had survived André de Malsabre's treachery, the thrusts of the Chartley family, their open hostility, and Phil's paralysing indifference—it would not survive either his contempt or his pity. Pity from Phil! Great God! Even André de Malsabre's insults seemed less degrading than that. She even hated the idea that he had seen those tears of disappointment which she had been quite unable to swallow.

The time for tears had gone by long ago. Long, long ago, before she had realised what a complete failure she had made of her life. And now it was too late! Too late for tears, too late for a humiliating confession The pale ghosts of those lovely moments in Santa Rosa rose up like a vision and murmured: "Too late! Love that has fled is more utterly dead than the flowers of yester-year Humiliation, if he cared, would almost be a joy! Since he no longer cares, it only means abasement."

And it would be no help to Gabrielle.

So with an effort Litta gathered her thoughts together. Phil had asked her how she knew that Prince Bobrinsky was dead, and after those few seconds' hesitation, during which Fate held the threads of her life in one hand and the scissors of destiny in another, she replied slowly:

"Intuition in cases like this is stronger than knowledge"

"Then you actually know nothing definite?" he asked

"No," she replied—"nothing."

No sooner had she spoken than she realised the portent of her words. She had spoken and Fate had cut the threads of her destiny; for is not man the arbiter of his Fate? Was she mistaken, or had she seen a curious shadow pass over her husband's face?—a strange ashen hue, as if something in him had died. The next moment, with a short, impatient sigh, he had jumped to his feet and gone up to the window And there he remained with his hands tightly clasped behind his back. All that Litta saw of Phil now was his

back, and it looked very uncompromising—hard and rigid like his code of life.

"Don't you agree with me?" Litta asked presently.

He seemed to make an effort to rouse himself from the contemplation of the traffic in the street below, and turned back towards the room

"I beg your pardon?" he queried vaguely.

"I said that intuition where one's affections are concerned is better than knowledge," Litta replied with a slight show of impatience

He came and sat down once more in the chair, beside the fireless hearth, and then said coolly:

"Hardly in this case, I think. The Princess must know whether the letter which the man brought her was in her husband's writing or not."

"She believes that it is."

"Well, then?"

"Can't you see," Litta retorted, "that a woman like Gabrielle is ready to believe what she wants to? She wants to believe that her husband is alive, and that by running after those jewels she is going to save him from that hell of a prison where he is supposed to be."

"You may be right," Sir Philip rejoined coldly —"I am not in a position to judge, of course; but pardon me if I don't quite see what you wish me to do in the matter."

"You have lots of friends, Phil," Litta said with a sudden note of pleading in her voice. "Wouldn't it be possible to stop Gabrielle from embarking—she is going by way of Harwich and the Hook of Holland—to detain her if only for a few hours until . . ?

Sir Philip smiled. "Hardly possible, I should say."

"Lord Escrick is your intimate friend."

"He is. But one couldn't go even to one's intimate friend with the request to put an outrage upon a lady who has done nothing to deserve it."

"Outrage? What in the world do you mean?"

"I mean that what you are asking me to do would be an outrage on your friend. As far as I understand it, you are suggesting that I should go to Escrick and ask him to wire or telephone to Harwich—it could only be done by wire or telephone—rescinding a passport, which I imagine is in order. To begin with, Escrick wouldn't do it; and I don't suppose you realise that that sort of thing would only be done in the case of a criminal and through the intervention of the police."

"No!" Litta broke in vehemently. "I only realise that I am in terrible distress and that you won't do anything to help me"

"Not do anything to help you? My God . . .!"

Litta had not meant to say even that much by way of reproach. The taunt had escaped her much against her will, and already she was ashamed. To show feeling before a man who cared so little! How senseless! How futile! She had jumped to her feet, impatient with herself for having shown even that amount of feeling before a man who cared so little, and she was at the other end of the room, busy trying to mop up the tears that would come to her eyes. She was perhaps too deeply absorbed in her own grief

and too conscious of utter disappointment to have given even a passing thought to Phil at this moment. But very often when the ear does not actually absorb a sound, the subconscious mind will record it, and reproduce it like a gramophone long after the sound itself has ceased to vibrate. Litta consciously did not hear Phil's cry—he had hardly uttered it above his breath—and yet, when directly afterwards a dead silence fell about her, she felt that her mind had registered something abnormal, something that was almost awesome. The next moment, however, when she looked at him, she saw him sitting, just as before, listless, his broad shoulders bent, and with his hands hanging limp between his knees. Litta even thought that he was looking bored.

So she finished mopping her eyes. They had gone dry all of a sudden, and turning to the mirror, she made a pathetic attempt to straighten her hat and to powder her nose.

"I am sorry," she said, as coolly as she could, "to have worried you about Gabrielle's affairs. I thought perhaps you would have a suggestion to make."

He appeared relieved when she said this, hoping no doubt that this unpleasant interview was at last coming to an end.

"I wish I could persuade you," was all he said, "that there is no reason for your worrying so much about it. After all, you say yourself that you are only surmising and that you have no foundation for your suspicions."

"None," she retorted drily. "Let's leave it at that."

He took this for a definite congé, and, rising, took up his hat.

"There's nothing else I can do for you?" he asked.

"No; nothing, thank you."

He finally turned to go. His hand was already on the door-knob; for one second he seemed to hesitate, then suggested with obvious diffidence, almost certain of a rebuff. "You won't return to Pertuis with me to-morrow?"

And she, without turning to give him a last look, replied curtly:

"No. In about a week perhaps. I'll let you know."

She heard the opening and closing of the door, then his firm, even footstep along the corridor. After that, silence.

It seemed to Litta as if a giant hand had closed another volume of her book of life.

The Celestial City XIV

It was useless to dwell on it. That volume of Litta's book of life was closed. The second one. The first contained the hectic story of her first youth, the gang, her father, those eighteen months' of prison life. The second was the story of her married life, a record of hope and of disillusion. It was closed now, and she wanted none of it.

Self-pity, since she was alone, brought a flood of tears to Litta's eyes. But after she had had a good cry she felt better, more calm, more able to think than she had been since last night.

Last night!

Now that she knew with absolute certainty that she had only herself to rely on, she felt more at peace, and also more resolute. She was not going to give way—not until she had exhausted every effort of which mind and body was capable. Phil had failed her! And, strangely enough, she did not pause to think why he had failed; she felt so utterly sore and bruised after her interview with him that she would not even try to think over it all again Enough that where she had hoped to find comfort and help she had only found indifference, and that with aching heart and wearied brain she resolved to find comfort and help elsewhere.

The first volume of her book of life! She took it down from the dust-laden shelves of the past. Indifferently at first, then more lovingly, she turned over its stained and faded pages. Her father! the gang! If she knew where to find her father, it would be to him that she would go.

If she knew where to find him—— It meant thinking. Thinking and turning over those pages of that half-forgotten book. Her father and the gang! Their headquarters were in Yeominster Yeominster had always been Litta's home, the only home she knew. The small house in Pierson Street, with the five stone steps leading up to the front door. As a child she had played all sorts of games by herself up and down those five stone steps—always by herself, for she didn't like those rough little boys and girls who wanted to play with her. The small house in Pierson Street with the dark passage invariably blocked up with the

perambulator that belonged to the people on the second floor—the people who always seemed to have a baby young enough or old enough to need a perambulator. And then the people on the first floor who were always quarrelling and breaking chairs and throwing things at one another. That had been Litta's home, and the place where her father and Jim and the rest of the gang would meet of an evening after "The Bishop's Apron" closed

"The Bishop's Apron"! Yeominster! Pierson Street! How these names came tumbling out of the storehouse of memory now! There was Kilts, the Scotchman! and one they called Italiano, he who had first called her Litta, because she was "litta, so litta!" and of course there was Jim! But for the war Litta would have married Jim, and would have gone on living in some other squalid house in Pierson Street with dark passages, blocked up with perambulators, and with people overhead who were perpetually breaking chairs and throwing things at one another Jim! Strangely enough, his was the face that seemed most shadowy as it came out reflected in the mirror of her mind But she remembered that Jim had his home in London. His mother kept a small public-house—in Bermondsey. Yes! that was it—Bermondsey—and the public-house was called "The Running Footman" How funny that she should remember all that so clearly, all of a sudden! And yet not really funny; it was only about eight years ago that she had gone to London with her father and they had gone together to see Jim's mother at Bermondsey. It was just

possible that she was still there, in which case——

Well, it was no use surmising. The thing was to act, and quickly. Fortunately Litta had put on a very plain dark dress when she went out first thing this morning. All she had to do now was to take off her ear-rings and her rings, and get a taxi to take her to Bermondsey. The page-boy outside Claridge's looked the very image of surprise when her ladyship, entering the taxi, asked the man if he knew a public-house in Bermondsey called "The Running Footman" The man did not know, but dared say that he could easily find out. And so her ladyship drove off, and the one page told the other page what a funny thing it was for a lidy to be going off in a taxi to a public-house in Bermondsey.

The Celestial City XV

JIM's mother still kept "The Running Footman" in Bermondsey, nor was she in the least surprised to see Litta walk into her bar-parlour.

"Why, if it isn't the kid!" was all she said, and it was only subsequently when she told of the visit to her friends that she volunteered the further information that anyone might have knocked her down with a feather. But to Litta she only remarked, after the first greetings were over, "I suppose you've come to see your father. He ain't gone out yet"

And that is how Litta knew that, at any rate,

in this one minor detail Chance had done her a good turn. Her father was here and not yet gone out! This would save her a journey to Yeominster and all the terrible delay this would entail.

Bill had spent the night under the hospitable roof of "The Running Footman" He was sitting in Mrs. Harris's kitchen finishing his breakfast, when Litta went in to him. He was in the act of pouring himself out a cup of tea.

"Hello, kid!" was all he said. Nor did he seem any more surprised at seeing her than Jim's mother had been "Have a cup of tea," he suggested; and when she shook her head, he just put the tea-pot down and remarked philosophically that he supposed she had already had a good breakfast.

Litta waited until the inevitable Havana was lit. Bill still smoked excellent Havanas, in spite of his being "down and out," as he had told her last night. Neither of them had said anything since that first greeting. Bill savoured his cigar, with his powerful limbs outstretched and his hands buried in the pockets of his trousers; Litta sat on the edge of the horse-hair sofa, her eyes fixed, unseeing, on a photo of Jim in uniform, taken while she was in prison, the last time he was home on leave, before a German bullet put an end to him.

Presently the silence became oppressive.

"Well, kid!" said Bill suddenly.

And she said. "Well, father!"

Silence again: Bill smoking, Litta wondering how she could best begin.

"Out with it, kid," her father resumed presently. "What is it? You haven't just come all this way to kiss your old father good morning, I'm thinking. You want something. Out with it."

"Not for myself, father." It was a cry from the heart, a cry of protest. Bill took it quite coolly.

"I dessay not," he said. "You've got that Russian affair on the brain, kid. That's what it is."

"Yes," she admitted. "That's what it is."

"Too late now, kid. They've gone"

"I know. It was a dirty trick you and Paul played on me, you know."

Inwardly Bill winced at that. A dirty trick! The supreme wrong! The keystone of that strange code of honour which bound the gang together. Whatever happened, they mustn't 'do the dirty' on one another! And the kid, by calling the affair of last night a dirty trick, had hit below the belt Outwardly, Bill only cast a quick glance at Litta from beneath his bushy brows. Then with a slow, deliberate movement, he took his cigar out of his mouth.

"Well, you see, kid," he said slowly, "we don't reckon now that you are entirely one of us."

A sharp retort was on Litta's lips. Fortunately she held it back. Her father was the last man in the world who could be bullied with impunity, or browbeaten with any chance of success. Therefore, "No, I suppose not," was all she said.

Silence again. It was more difficult than Litta had supposed With a quick, impatient sigh

she rose to her feet and came close up to her father, sidling against his rough clothes in the old habitual way she had always had. Standing as she now was, she couldn't see his face, nor did he look up at her. In fact, since she had started her cajoling way with him, he appeared more self-engrossed, less approachable than he had been at first.

"Look here, father," Litta began, and suddenly all her hesitation went from her, and the words came tumbling out rapidly, almost feverishly, "what I want to tell you is this. You told me last night that you and the others were very much down in your luck. Didn't you? That you looked to this Russian affair to bring you all a lot of money, and that if you gave it up—well!—that you would be down and out with nothing before any of you but—but—you know! Well, listen, father! I have got some money. You remember the draft you gave me for forty thousand pounds. I cashed that right away, but I only spent five thousand of it Then after I got married, Phil—I mean my husband—bought some securities for me that were very good, and the money has accumulated a bit. I have rather more than forty thousand pounds now, and the securities are all in my name; nobody has a word to say if I choose to sell them. Well, I don't want the money. I have no use for it. Phil has plenty and I want nothing—nothing except that you should be happy and comfortable, and leave my dear, my best friend alone. If you will do that, you shall have all the money I've got, and you and Kilts and the others can share it all up."

controlled, which Litta felt was about to express itself into words.

And she dreaded those words.

"You understand me, don't you, kid?" Bill went on, and his voice now was hoarse as if with all the tears which he had long forgotten how to shed. "You went away from me and nearly broke my heart. The pals'll tell you I've never been the same man since. I don't seem to care about anything now except money. And, by God! I don't know why I care about the money, now I can't give it to you You went and left me, and I've only got the pals to think of now——"

He paused, and suddenly a curious flash came into his eyes, intense, passionate, wilful. He gripped Litta by the shoulders with such force that she winced with the pain, and it was in a voice hoarse with longing that he cried out: "Now, if you was to come back to me——"

Wide-eyed, Litta gazed at him; not a word escaped her, and her father too was silent, gazing, gazing into those mysterious eyes of hers, holding them with the power of his will, the strength of a passionate fondness as immeasurable, as incomprehensible, as infinity. The sounds of London life receded into the remote distance, whilst these two souls, leaving their inert bodies in the banal suburban room, flew away together into that unknown region, the Celestial City, which can only be entered hand-in-hand—never alone.

"If you was to come back to me——"

Silence was merged in the past; the past with its unforgotten affections, the thousand and one little trifles that bind two loving hearts together,

the past with its sins and its humiliations commonly endured, its privations, its transient joys and gnawing anxieties. The past with its irresistible bond—that of sins committed hand-in-hand. The hardened criminal and the unfortunate girl who had striven so hard to shake off the fetters of the old life were gazing into one another's eyes and realising that those fetters had never been wholly broken.

"If you was to come back to me——"

Somewhere in the room a clock struck the hour. Litta woke as from a dream, a slight shiver went through her body. She was still on her knees, and felt herself falling, falling into an abyss which her father had suddenly disclosed yawning at her feet. But his strong hands held her body, just as his eyes compelled her soul.

"If you came to me, kid," he said in a hoarse whisper, "and said to me, 'Father, I'll come back, only don't let my friend be hurt. Give up this Russian business, and I'll come back to you!' If you said that to me, kid, then, by Gawd, you'd have me. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"With the money you've got I'd pay off the others. I'd have to do that," he went on eagerly, "but there might be a thousand or so left, and with it we could buy a little bit of property somewhere. In Devonshire, eh, kid? and keep a cow and chickens, and go to church on Sundays I've often thought of that when I was lonely, especially at first, when I kept thinking every day that you'd come back I never believed that you'd stick it so long, kid, not all these grand people, who'd

look down on you proper if they only knew. What?"

Litta smiled. Not bitterly. Her thoughts had flown to the Chartleys up in Rutlandshire with their dowdy women-folk and their airs as if God Almighty had created a special rarefied atmosphere for them to breathe.

"You don't look happy, kid," her father went on more quietly. "If I'd seen you looking happy, I shouldn't have said a word. But I know you too well. I know that dear little mug of yours. Every line of it. Your eyes. Your mouth. I can tell you're not happy. Are you now?"

Then, as Litta made no reply, he continued: "They're not our sort; and that's about it. You and your grand folk, what have you to talk about? You couldn't tell them about Pierson Street and your time in Yeominster, and about Simeon Goldstein and the money we got out of him. Now. this husband of yours. I don't know who he is. and I don't want to; but did he never want to know who you was, and where you come from?"

Litta shook her head. "No!" she said "He was supposed to be very much in love with me, and he never asked me any questions."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"No. I told him I was an orphan and that my parents were humble folk without any family connections. He didn't ask anything more."

"And were you in love with him, kid?"

"No," Litta replied simply.

"No! I see! You just wanted to have a husband and be a grand lady. And I don't blame you. I tell you I don't know who he is, and I

don't want to. I don't even want to know his name. But what I say is: could you go to him to-day, and say to him, 'My father has done time for burglary, and I've done time in Yeominster gaol. Now then, what price your wife, my lord? Do you still love her?' Could you go and say that to your husband, kid?"

"No!"

"Well, then, what's the good of it all, I say? You're not happy, and you ain't any good to him as a wife. What's the good of a wife who daren't open her mouth for fear she'd let the cat of her past life out of the bag? Come back to your old father, kid," he went on lustily. "I'd pretty soon bring the smiles back into your pretty face. Me and the pals, of course You know, there's that Italiano, you can't think what a——"

He went on talking. Talking. Telling her bits of anecdotes about his mates: Kilts, the Italiano, Paul Sergine, Kilts's voyage to Russia; his own plans for the cottage in Devonshire, the cow, the pigs. He was going to be churchwarden and she would hold bazaars for the benefit of girls who had not run quite straight. She only listened with half an ear, a curious sense of peace creeping over her, paralysing her limbs and fettering her thoughts Now and again she looked up at her father: his eagerness, his wilfulness, fascinated her; that love of his for her, so like the love of a wild beast for its young, as ready to devour as to hug, but strong and lasting for all that. She knew that deep down in her heart she had thought of this, when she found her way to the public-house in Bermondsey—to come back to the one

man who cared for her, break with that new life in which she had found nothing but disillusionment, in which she had no real part. And whilst through her tears she looked at her father's face it became blurred, and through it she saw, like when one lantern-slide is put over another, the face of her husband, high-bred, indifferent, and bored And feeling her father's hands gripping her shoulders till they ached, she saw Phil's slender, aristocratic hands hanging, limp, between his knees.

And the force of Bill's rough logic gripped her mind as his hands gripped her shoulders. Rough logic, but to her so true. What was the good of it all? Of that life of misunderstanding, of disillusionments, of constant irritation? That pathetic and futile attempt from time to time of blowing on the dead ashes of love? What was the good to Phil of a wife who was less even than a friend? A wife who would sooner die now than trust him with the secret of her life? How right her father was!—how right! He at least had love to give! The love of a heart closed to every other moral sense, true, but love for all that. And at this hour, more than ever in her life, Litta ached for love. She saw in her mind's eye the creeper-clad Devonshire cottage of which her father spoke, the chickens, the drive to the market town, the country church with the old decrepit parson droning from the pulpit, the Sunday meals with roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and knives with black wooden handles, and salt-cellars innocent of spoons, and the cat on the hearth-rug, the dog clamouring for food, the Havana cigars

forgotten, in the homely, evil-smelling pipe And beside that picture she saw the terraced gardens of du Pertuis, she smelt the air heavy with the perfume of heliotrope, and she saw the table with its lace napery, its priceless silver, the winter-garden with its rockery, and its nooks and its flowers, and the master of the house serene, high-bred, talking of the latest invention in artificial manure and of the most recent device for the high production of eggs.

And there came such an agonising pain in her heart that with an impulsive movement she buried her face against her father's shoulder and cried out her heart against that friendly bit of rough tweed. She did not see the look of triumphant satisfaction which in Bill's eyes at this moment almost got the better of his look of affection. With his arm round her, his hand stroking her hair, he let her cry in peace. The battle was won, and he knew it The terms of peace had alone now to be considered

"That's all right, kid," he said—"that's all right! When you've had a good cry, we'll just talk it all over quietly."

The Celestial City XVI

To Litta there was in her father's proposal all the attraction of sacrifice. She was going to give up something for her friend; she was going to give up that new life which she had planned

for herself when she set out on her great adventure; she was going back, deliberately and with eyes open, to that past which had seemed so hateful to her, when she came out of Yeominster prison, that she was ready to abandon her father, who was the only being in the world whom she had really loved, the only human being who belonged to her, now that Jim was dead.

Now she was going back in a measure to that life. She had no illusions whatever about the creeper-clad cottage in Devonshire; it would probably do to begin with, but would her own affection and the monotony of a domestic life keep her father permanently away from the influences which had ruled him all his life? Well, it was perhaps too soon to think of that while the terms of her surrender were being discussed. Yes, she would go back to him, to Devonshire or Pierson Street, she didn't care which. So long as he kept her ignorant of the doings of the gang, she didn't care, she promised that she wouldn't care. To his protestations that he would start a new life she gave an indulgent smile. He was so like a naughty child just then, who was promising to be good. But she knew him too well to accept those other protestations of his that her Russian friend would be all right

"I'll see to that," he declared with what he felt must be a convincing oath.

"You'll take me to her right away," Litta insisted very firmly.

"They've gone, kid," he protested. "Paul and your friend. They'll be in Vienna to-morrow."

"Then we must be there the next day."

"I don't know how long they'll be there. Most likely they'll go straight on."

"Then we'll have to follow them."

"What? To Russia?"

"Wherever they are going."

Bill grew impatient. He never could bear being thwarted, not even by the kid. When she was a baby, he didn't mind her pulling his hair or poking her little fingers into his mouth; but when she grew older and tried to resist him, he snarled, and she was too wise not to give in.

"You are talking silly, kid," he said, and pushing her almost roughly from him, he jumped to his feet and started pacing up and down the narrow room, looking more like some untamed beast than ever. "I tell you that no harm is coming to your friend. Kilts can start to-night and meet her and Paul in Vienna. As a matter of fact, I don't mind telling you that they will anyhow have to stop in Vienna two or three days Never mind why. But Kilts has done the journey before: he knows the ropes He'll see Sergine and the others. He'll make it all right I'll explain. I give you my word it'll be all right. So don't talk silly."

Litta had half fallen backwards when her father pushed her away from him. Now, while he talked and paced up and down the room, trying to convince her of his straight intentions, she struggled to her feet and went and sat down on the corner of the horse-hair sofa She rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hand. When her father had finished speaking she said quite quietly:

"Look here, father! You are forgetting, aren't you? that this is a bargain between us. You want me to come back to you, I can see that, and I—well, as you say, I'm not very happy. I have made a mess of my life, I can see that too, and what happens to me after this doesn't really much matter. But there is this one thing. Once I leave my husband, I can't ever go back to him. He's not the sort of man you can play fast and loose with——"

"Who says you're to play fast and loose with him or anybody else?" Bill broke in roughly. "Who says you're ever to go back to him? If you come back to your old father, kid, you'll never wish to leave him again. I tell you, I'll make you so happy——"

"I know." She, in her turn, broke in upon his protestations "But that's not the point. You must understand that when I leave Phil, I burn my boats. You admit that, don't you, father?"

"Well, yes," he was willing to admit.

"Even if Kilts came back from Vienna and said that he had failed to make any arrangement with the others, that Princess Bobrinsky was still on her way to Russia, still off to find her jewels, which will be taken from her as soon as found, even if Kilts came back with that story, I should still have burnt my boats. And I say that a bargain is a bargain. If I leave my husband, my new life, all my friends and acquaintances to-day, it will be in order to go with you to Vienna, and to find Princess Bobrinsky before your friends have dragged her into Russia, from which awful place she would never return. A bargain is a

bargain," Litta reiterated firmly, "and I want to make sure that I get my share"

"Which means," Bill rejoined with a careless laugh, "that you don't trust your old father."

"Even if I trusted you," she rejoined, "there are the others to think of. You are not exactly their lord and master. Are you?"

"No," he admitted. "Not exactly But they think a lot of me, and an awful lot of you. They want you back with us almost as much as I do. Almost," he reiterated, conscious perhaps that the statement wouldn't altogether carry conviction.

"Very kind, I am sure," Litta said drily. "All the same, you can't blame me for wanting to make sure"

"No," Bill slowly rejoined, "I don't altogether blame you. Not that we would do the dirty on you, kid," he added glibly.

"I dare say not Not what you would call doing the dirty. Anyway, we are going to Vienna together," Litta said with such compelling emphasis that Bill paused in his restless pacing up and down the room and came to a standstill in front of her, gazing down on her, as if it had suddenly dawned upon him that his daughter was no longer the kid of the olden days, but a woman who knew her own mind and meant to get what she wanted.

"We are going to Vienna together," she reiterated, and her resolute glance answered his without the slightest tremor of anxiety. "And either the Princess Bobrinsky comes back with us, in which case you can set about to look for that cottage in Devonshire; or she doesn't, in which

case I'll bid you good-bye, and it will be for ever this time"

Litta had been quite right in her original estimate of her father. He was not the man to be either browbeaten or bullied. Not in the olden days, that is, and not with the usual threats But this was something quite different. The kid was his tendon Achilles, the one vulnerable spot in his chain-armour of callousness and crime; he loved her to the point of inhuman savagery. And he wanted her back. His luck, since she went away, had been dead out. She was not only a necessity to his life, she had become life itself. Her absence had shown him how much he needed her, and now that he had seen her again, now that she held out the prospect of her return, he knew that if he lost her again there would certainly be nothing left between himself and a suicide's grave.

So much indeed did he love her, that when she had delivered her inexorable "either—or," he raised his powerful fist, ready to knock her down. How dare she even think of leaving him again? Knowing at the bottom of his untamed heart that he meant to deceive her, that no power on earth would make him give up that Russian affair, which meant a fortune to him and to his mates, he was ready to knock her down just because she threatened to leave him again To knock her down—perhaps to kill her. He didn't know. When he approached her with raised fist, and she returned his gaze, unflinching, he knew that he had been ready to kill her—and himself probably afterwards She was life itself, was the kid, and she threatened to leave him again. Why, he

could knock her breath out of her with one blow: she was so litta—so litta!

"You can strike me, father," she said, with that funny little air of resolution which she had taken on since she led the grand life and got a swell for a husband, "but you can't make me alter my mind."

How funny she was! And how litta! Bill's fist dropped to the level of his eyes, and he gazed on that clenched fist of his, and laughed because just for a moment he had thought of knocking her down with it. It really was too funny! In fact, it seemed like going for a sparrow with a sledge-hammer. All she wanted was coaxing, humouring. Women were queer, and the kid the queerest of all. After all, what was a journey to Vienna or to any other goddam place in the world? It would please the kid, and once he had her all to himself, and all her grand friends were out of the way, why, he'd be a born fool if she ever thought of leaving him again. *Whatever happened!* His share in the Russian business wouldn't be less than thirty thousand pounds, and with the other forty or fifty thousand which she had, they would be as rich and as grand as anybody. And if the kid wanted to lead a grand life, why, dammit all, she could have it, without trailing a swell or any other kind of husband behind her.

Litta was gazing at her father now, wide-eyed and puzzled because he had thrown back his head and was laughing, laughing as if he had heard a huge joke He caught her glance, whilst he was wiping the tears from his eyes.

"You wonder at me laughing, kid," he said.

"But you can't think how funny it is to see you looking like that. A real, proper little Tartar of a woman, and no mistake! Well," he went on carelessly, "have it your own way. We'll get off to Vienna first thing to-morrow morning. I suppose I shall have to see about passports."

He got his cigar-case out of his pocket, and carefully selected a Havana, lit it, and throwing himself into Mrs. Harris's best Windsor chair, he stretched out his mighty legs and smoked contentedly, waiting for the kid to speak. She was still rather puzzled.

"You quite understand, don't you, father?" she said after a moment or two, "that there's nothing settled until after I have seen the Princess Bobrinsky."

Again he laughed. He felt very happy and contented now He had sized up the kid and he had sized up his own ability to deal with her. "Yes," he said, "I quite understand, you little vixen. A bargain is a bargain, as you say. You want to make sure that your old father is not going to do the dirty on you. That's about the size of it"

"Yes," she admitted with a cajoling smile. "That *is* about the size of it."

"Well, then, let me tell you that your old father also wants to make sure that *you* are not going to do the dirty on *him*"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say, kid You are so damned suspicious, it seems to me that you are judging me by what you might do yourself What's to tell me that when you and your Princess get

together you won't leave your poor, trusting father in the lurch, eh?—go off with her and not care a kick on the shins what becomes of me What?"

"What is to tell you that, father?" she retorted, and her eyes, no longer mysterious or inscrutable, were as blue and as clear as the waters of the bay of Santa Rosa. "Only this I *want* to come back to you. With all my soul I want to come back. I have tried to lead a new life—a life different from anything I had ever been accustomed to, one that I used to dream of, sometimes, even in gaol. Well, it has been a ghastly failure. I can't tell you what a failure it has been. But I hate it now. I hate it. I want to get away from it. To forget it. I have no other wish in life but to forget it. But I have one great duty, and that is to see that no harm comes to Gabrielle Bobrinsky. She was my first friend when I started that new life. She was ever so sweet and tender and understanding. She never asked any questions; she just understood. She understood that I came from very humble people, that I'd had no education to speak of, but she never knew—thank God for that—that all the people I had ever been associated with had spent part of their life in gaol, and that I myself had gone through that mill For more than two years we lived together, sometimes very quietly in a little village in the south of France, sometimes right in the very midst of Society, and so on, in Rome or Monte Carlo or even London But all the time she was educating me. I hardly knew that she was doing it, but she was educating me. From her I learned how to speak properly, I learned how to talk about art

and music and politics, I learned how to understand all these things. Thanks to her I was able to hold my own, and when I married, though my husband knew nothing about me either, he didn't have to blush for my want of education. Therefore I owe a big, big duty to Gabrielle; when that's done, I can set about forgetting these last three years, which, now that I look back on them, seem to me nothing but a horrible nightmare."

A very little while ago Litta was ready to persuade herself that by going back to her father she was making a sacrifice in order to save her friend. Even while she poured out this flood of bitter recollections in her father's over-willing ears, she knew that the idea of sacrifice was a delusion, she knew that when she said she longed to go back and to forget she was speaking the truth. Destiny was busy cutting the thread that bound her to her new life, and she was glad of it. She felt an intense bitterness towards the disillusionments of the past three years, and if this great cataclysm had not occurred, if she had never had the incentive to go back to her father, she would certainly have left Philip sooner or later. Yes, she did want to forget! In that she was quite candid. She felt at this moment that if only she could forget Phil, blot him out of her life altogether, she could face the future with some hope of happiness. And how thankful he would be to be rid of her! Perhaps when she wrote to tell him of her irrevocable decision, she would also tell him everything. And this would kill any lingering regret that might ruffle his high-bred equanimity.

Then he too would forget—marry some other woman probably, whom he would make supremely miserable, unless she were a wooden dummy like himself.

"You certainly must have had a pretty thin time, kid," was her father's comment on her lengthy outburst, "or you wouldn't be talking like that."

"I didn't mean to say much," she rejoined, and, rising, she went to the window and looked out on the dreary, rain-sodden scene that somehow recalled Pierson Street more vividly than even her father's presence had done.

"You can say anything to your old father," he commented, puffing leisurely at his cigar "Some day I expect you'll tell him lots more. But now you'd best get home and see to your packing. Come back this evening, and I'll tell you what I've done"

"There's nothing much to do, is there?" she asked

"Well, there are the passports."

"Mine will carry me through all right to Vienna. All I've got to do is to get a visa at the Austrian Consulate, which is very easily done. What about yours?"

"Oh!" Bill said with a vague sweep of the arm, "I'm all right. I've got friends all over the place, quite as useful as your grand ones, I can tell you"

Litta couldn't help laughing

"Far more useful, I should say," she remarked It wasn't likely that a gang of malefactors would ever be in trouble about passports. It is usually

had every reason for leaving a husband who cared not one jot for her, in favour of a father to whom she was a primary necessity of life.

But it was strange that a wayward Fate in the shape of an influential Permanent Under-Secretary of State should have stepped in at this very moment and sent Phil off to Vienna. Litta wondered when he would start, whether, by one of those extraordinary coincidences which occur in real life, Phil would travel across Europe by the same train that she and her father intended to take. If so, where would they meet—she and the husband whom she had decided to leave—and how?

This thought worried her all the afternoon while she superintended her packing, and once or twice the maid glanced at her, puzzled and half afraid, having asked a question three or four times of her ladyship and receiving nothing but a vacant stare in reply.

To her father she said nothing about Phil's note, of course. But by this time she had succeeded in persuading herself that Phil would certainly go down to du Pertuis first and see that his strawberries had been properly planted. From there he could catch the Milan express, direct to Vienna; in all probability by then she and her father would be through with their errand; and in any case Vienna was a large town, with numberless hotels. Phil would select the most exclusive one, very different and quite remote from the one which Kilts had recommended. Kilts, it seems, was coming with them He knew the language and he knew the ropes Bill said he couldn't get on without old Kilts, and Litta was quite thankful her father

would have a pal to talk to during the journey and leave her a good deal to herself.

There was no doubt about it; Kilts knew the ropes. In the turn of a hand he had secured two double berths in the Orient Express, whilst numbers of travellers, less knowledgable than he, were vainly trying to book seats for themselves. Money apparently was no object; though her father had declared that he was "down and out," there seemed to be plenty of money to pay for an expensive journey. Litta had offered to share expenses, but her father had only laughed. There was plenty of peppercorn, he said; it was money that was scarce The kid should travel with him just as grandly as she would with her swell of a husband, and Litta certainly had nothing to complain of in the way of comfort and luxury. She had the one double berth to herself, which gave her all the solitude she needed Her father shared the other with Kilts. They were silent men, both of them; all day they sat, staring uninterestedly into the varying landscapes which the rapid movement across Europe unfolded before their eyes· the Rhine, so full of memories to most, meant nothing to them—the forests of Bavaria, full of mystery for the imaginative mind, were like a sealed book to these two men, brooding over the fortune that awaited them at the end of their journey, a fortune to be won at the cost of lies and treachery and of cruelty too great to be recorded.

Nor did Litta's keen, imaginative mind respond any more readily to Nature's exquisite and varying pictures, to the stateliness of Cologne, the

grimness of ancient fortifications, the prosperous quietude of the Central German towns, the picturesqueness of Nuremberg, the rugged beauty of the Danube, which seemed to murmur an endless epopee of regret for the glory that had gone All that Litta saw through the endless vistas of the pine forests of Bavaria was the faces of her husband and her friend—the friend whom she would save from prison and death, if not from a bitter disappointment, and the husband whom she prayed that she might never see again. This last was a haunting fear. When she boarded the boat at Dover, when she disembarked at Ostende, the first time that she went to the restaurant car, always, always she had the fear that Phil would suddenly appear before her, that once more she would have to speak with him, plead, explain perhaps. Not that Phil would ask questions or demand an explanation—that was not Phil's way; but his cold, appraising eyes would rest on her father or on Kilts, and she would be left either to lie again or to make a hasty confession, under hopelessly banal conditions—when she felt that she would sooner die than make it. now that it was too late.

The Celestial City *XVIII*

AND the same haunting fear dogged her when they arrived in Vienna; through the crowd in the station she thought every second that she would be seeing [illegible]

They drove to a small, quiet hotel in a narrow street off the Tegethoffstrasse, she and her father and Kilts. She asked eagerly if they would find the Russian and the Princess Bobrinsky there. Kilts said that that was the hotel where Paul had intended to stay. Litta, who was dog-tired, more mentally perhaps than physically, felt all her youth and energy reviving at the prospect of seeing Gabrielle so soon. After all it was worth it, if only she could see Gabrielle in time, have her friend to herself for a brief half-hour, during which all the truth would have to be told, in order to make Gabrielle believe. Poor Gabrielle! At this moment she was probably sitting nursing her dreams. Within an hour, perhaps, Kilts or her father would have told her everything, and it would be left to Litta to try to soothe the wound. Of course Gabrielle would have to be told the truth—the whole truth!—everything!—and the last link in the chain that bound Litta to the new life would then be broken, and there would be nothing ahead but a more or less sordid edition of Pierson Street.

The rattling of the old-fashioned cab upon the cobblestones ceased all of a sudden Litta would have liked to jump out and to be the first to enquire after Princess Bobrinsky, but Kilts forestalled her He was the first out of the cab and Litta saw him through the illuminated hall-door talking to the concierge. A moment later she was beside him, leaving her father to deal with the luggage Kilts and the concierge were talking glibly together. Litta, not knowing a word of German, could only stand by, trying to curb her impatience

Now and again she put in a quick "What does he say?" and presently an anxious "Isn't the Princess here?"

Kilts apparently had given orders for the luggage to be brought in, because a man with a genial face, a huge moustache, and a checked apron was bringing it into the hall, and her father came in too in its wake. Litta could no longer control herself, and when Kilts attempted to go off with the concierge she clung resolutely to his arm.

"What is it, Kilts?" she asked. "Isn't the Princess here?"

The concierge had gone on, down the passage, in the direction of the reception bureau. Kilts replied hastily:

"I am afraid not. Wait one moment. I'll tell you all about it in a minute."

Then he followed the concierge, and for the next few minutes seemed engrossed in arranging about rooms with the reception-clerk. There was no hall or lounge in the little hotel, only the long, narrow passage encumbered with luggage. Litta made her way through it, until on her right she saw a glass door, on which was engraved the grandiose legend: "Salon"! It gave on a tiny room which reeked of stale tobacco-smoke, and held three chairs covered in green plush and a diminutive table on which was an empty ink-stand, a broken pen, and an altogether futile piece of blotting-paper. Litta remained standing in the doorway as if to guard the room against intruders She kept her eyes fixed on Kilts's back, determined to hear what he had to say about Gabrielle as

soon as he had finished his arrangements with the reception-clerk. Her father had joined Kilts at the bureau, and presently the two men turned and saw her, and they joined her in the "salon," carefully closing the door behind them.

"Well?" Litta queried. "Where is she?"

Kilts shrugged his shoulders. He looked puzzled and anxious

"That's just it," he replied. "The concierge doesn't know. Nor does the clerk. They didn't come to this hotel. I can't make it out; can you, Bill?"

Bill shrugged also. "It does seem funny. Paul always put up at this hotel, when he was this way. So did you, Kilts, didn't ye? Always?"

Kilts nodded sagely. He seemed no longer nonplussed.

"We've got to find them," Litta declared, her throat dry, her lips twitching with the intensity of her disappointment. "What's to be done?"

"Oh! we can find them right enough," Kilts said, and the very tone in which he said this seemed reassuring.

"I'll be off to the nearest police-station in a jiffy. They keep a record of every visitor in every hotel in the town, and I'll soon find somebody who'll put me in the way of finding where they are."

It was marvellous how easily Kilts took command of the situation He seemed to have friends everywhere who could put him in the way of things Litta already had the feeling that her disappointment was only momentary. It was not much more than five o'clock in the afternoon,

before the day was much older Gabrielle would be found, the expression on Kilts's face indicated that, at a word from him, she would be found

In the meanwhile the rooms had been arranged for; the genial-faced porter with the huge moustache had already taken the luggage upstairs. Having watched Kilts go out of the hotel and disappear round the corner of the narrow street into the wide Tegethoffstrasse, Litta took the lift and was shown into her room It looked clean and comfortable, with snow-white napery everywhere, and a bed that was very inviting after the long, tiring journey. Her father's room was next door. She could hear him moving about, unpacking his things Litta went to the window, opened it, and looked down into the street. This side of the hotel gave on the busy Tegethoffstrasse, and the old-fashioned little cabs with their pair of smart Hungarian horses rattled along merrily enough on the uneven pavement. Litta knew very little of foreign cities. She had been in Paris and in Rome with Gabrielle Bobrinsky, and also visited one or two other French and Italian towns with her friend first, and then with Phil. Perhaps it was that her heart was burdened with sorrow and anxiety, but Vienna—this glimpse which she had of it—struck her as sad, with a kind of dignified and hopeless sadness, like that of a Queen who once had been very popular and much courted, and then been forced to abdicate. Litta had heard of Vienna as hardly second to Paris in splendour or to London in artistic resource; she supposed that the war had hit the beautiful city rather hard.

But she was in no mood to philosophise on that or any problem She certainly had a quick, observant mind, but to-day half the world might be tottering at her feet before she would observe any catastrophe, save the absence of Gabrielle. Kilts had promised to be back soon, and all three of them were going to sally forth after that and get dinner at one of the restaurants on the Ring. To kill time, Litta took out one of her dresses from her valise. She rang for hot water, washed, and changed her dress Half an hour went by. Her nerves were terribly on edge. She held her hands in hot water, and yet they remained icy cold. If Gabrielle had left Vienna already, what would she, Litta, do? Go after her, of course, until she had found her, until she could hold that dear friend in her arms, and tell her the whole, bitter truth: "Your Cyril is dead, my dear one, and the whole shameful lie is just a trap to make you disclose the hiding-place of your jewels, after which you would be left to fight your way out of that abominable country as best you could, with every chance of life and liberty against you I know it because my father is a party to that infamous conspiracy. I know it, and would have told you in London, only you slipped away because you didn't believe me then, as I had only told you half the truth"

Many and many a time during the long, wearisome journey had Litta rehearsed in her mind what she would say to Gabrielle; and now the hour had almost struck for the fulfilment. Half an hour had gone by, and suddenly Litta heard a heavy footfall on the corridor outside,

and then the closing and shutting of the door next to hers. In less than three seconds she was in her father's room. Kilts had returned. He still looked sure of himself and in a measure reassuring, but Litta did not know whether she had expected that he would actually bring Gabrielle along with him. Certain it is that when she saw him there alone, she was so utterly disappointed that she felt physically sick for the moment, and as soon as the door had shut-to behind her, she fell up against it, giddy and faint.

"Hello, kid. What's the matter?"

Her father had her in his arms and dragged her into a cosy armchair. But she wouldn't rest. Her great, luminous eyes were fixed on Kilts whilst her quivering lips murmured: "Well?"

"It's all right, kid," her father said, and gently patted her shoulder. "We'll have the lady here all right to-morrow."

"Why not to-day?" Litta demanded quickly.

"I've been to the police-station," Kilts explained "I found a pal, just as I thought. He told me there'd be no difficulty at all, but that the names of the travellers who had arrived yesterday had not all come in yet. But they are bound to come in," he went on glibly, unable probably to stand the look of bitter disappointment in the kid's violet eyes. "Don't you fret about it, kid. This fellow I know told me that every visitor who comes into Vienna and goes to an hotel has got to register his name at once, and the lists of names are collected the next morning by the police of each district. He's promised to let me know definitely by midday to-morrow. So there."

And her father added, still gently patting her shoulder: "Don't fret, kid; it's sure to be all right."

They were both so kind. So kind. Litta felt the tension of her nerves ease off a little, and tears trickled down her cheeks. She tried to smile at the two men through her tears.

"There—that's better," Kilts said cheerily. "Shall we go and get something to eat?"

Litta rose, alert, determined to make things as cheery as possible for these two men who were so concerned about her, and especially for her father, who, after all said and done, was making such an enormous sacrifice for her sake. How differently events might have turned out if—when she went off presently to get her coat and gloves—she had been gifted with the power of hearing whispers through closed doors, for then she would have heard her father uttering one of his favourite oaths and then saying to Kilts:

"It's a pretty dirty business, ain't it, mate?"

And Kilts, philosophical and self-assured, retorting blandly:

"Well, I don't look at it in that light. The kid was unhappy, and when she's got over the first disappointment, she'll be thankful that you've taken her away from her grand life. You mustn't take any notice of her crying, you know. Women have always got tears handy. This Russian Princess can't be anything much to her. I don't believe in friendship between women, do you?"

"I suppose," Bill rejoined, ignoring the question, "they are still in Vienna"

"Yes," Kilts replied with a dry laugh. "They

are at the Imperial, one of the grand hotels on the Ring. I spoke to Paul. He is travelling as the Princess's courier. I told him that he must get her away by the first train to-morrow morning, or there'd be trouble."

"Well, what did he say?"

"That he'd do his best, but there is a bit of a delay over their visas for Hungary."

"Hungary?"

"They've got to go through Budapest to get to Russia," Kilts explained, "and it seems there's always trouble about passports between Austria and Hungary; not English ones, of course, but Paul and the Princess are both of them Russian subjects and the Hungarians are so frightened of Bolshevism that they raise all the difficulties they possibly can in the way of Russians going through their country."

"Then, what's Paul going to do?"

"Oh, Paul'll be all right. He knows the ropes, and he has a pal here who is seeing to the thing for him, and getting the visas through as quickly as possible This pal has promised Paul that the two passports will be quite in order, in time for him and the Princess to catch the morning train to Budapest There's one leaves at half-past ten and another at noon So if we can get through the morning all right——"

"Oh! we'll do that all right enough," Bill asserted in response to Kilts's suggestion "You see, the kid don't suspect anything. She thinks I'm just as keen on finding this Russian woman as she is Well, if we can hang about a couple of days, she'll settle down, and she'll have got

so used to her old father she won't care if she meets that pal of hers or if she don't. She'll understand we can't give up a quarter of a million quid just like that. She ain't no fool, isn't the kid. You leave her to me. All you got to do is to get Paul and the Russian woman out of the way, and leave the kid to me."

But Litta was not gifted with the power to hear what went on behind closed doors. While she put on her coat and gloves, she forced herself to put aside her anxiety about Gabrielle, and to assume something of that cheerfulness and of that joy in life which had been the essence of her nature in the past, before Phil had stepped in and turned all her joy into sorrow and all her hopes into a fool's paradise.

The Celestial City XIX

Bill was quite right. Litta suspected nothing. It was not so much a question of trusting her father as that of believing that he needed her more than he did any money in the world. There had been such a world of longing not only in his eyes, but in his every expression and every movement, when he had asked her to come back to him, and the whole vista of peace and relief that the suggestion had opened up before her had been so dazzling that she had not paused to analyse the complexities of his nature—complexities which, in truth, would have been beyond the comprehension of a learned psychologist.

All through the dinner at a genial little restaurant on the Ring, with that super-excellent food before her which can only be obtained in Vienna, Litta delighted the two men by her gaiety. She would not let her father see anything of her anxiety, would not let him suspect her misgivings even remotely.

She was young and had had a trying time for days, both mentally and physically trying. Health and youth asserted their rights, and when night came on, she slept well in the clean, cosy bed that smelt of dried herbs and of soap. Everything seemed for the best the next morning: the excellent coffee, the luscious little rolls and fresh butter, the glass of cold water which in Vienna has the effect of champagne on spirits and on nerves. It was all good. Excellent!

Kilts had said something about a wonderful walk, just on the outskirts of the town, called the "Prater," where one could wander under avenues of forest trees that must be thick with buds just now. Litta, who had got up as soon as the morning sun came streaming in through her open windows, and the noisy little cabs started clattering up and down the cobble-stones, was ready for a long walk. She went into her father's room to give him a morning kiss. He was still in bed. Laughing, she called him "lazy-bones," and without waiting for his consent, she rang the bell and ordered his breakfast. She was so gay, so happy, that Bill hugged himself with the belief that already the kid was "getting over it" She was already forgetting her grand life and her swell husband; now, if only Paul manœuvred

the Russian woman quickly over the border, he, Bill, would be a born fool if he let the kid slip through his fingers, happen what may.

Happen what may? Litta thought that what would happen to-day would be that she would see Gabrielle and that by the power of sheer love she would attenuate the cruelty of the blow which must inevitably be dealt.

Happen what may? And Bill shrugged his shoulders carelessly, indifferently, because he thought that he could "deal with the kid."

But Litta out in the sunshine was just the bondswoman of Youth. Youth was her master to-day. He insisted on it that she should forget everything except that the spring air was exhilarating, that the sun was warm, and that it was good to be alive. With commendable pluck she boarded a tram on which she saw the word "Prater" clearly written. It happened to be going in the opposite direction, but the man on whom she turned the battery of great, enquiring eyes, more blue than the sky, contrived to make her understand the situation, and a moment or two later, ensconced between a market-woman of ample proportions who balanced a basket of early anemones on her large lap and a young representative of Viennese Montmartredom, she was actually on her way to the Prater.

It was not far, soon the tram came to a halt and the conductor, pointing across the vast, busy place, pointed the Park out to her. Litta, turning into the wide avenue, filled her lungs with the sweet, spring air. It smelt good! So good! The big gummy buds on the chestnut trees had burst

in the night, and each tiny twig bore a bunch of bright green foliage. The elms were in full leaf, and looked like fairy-trees with their emerald curls fluttering in the morning breeze, but the limes and the oaks were still shy, and that clump over there with their myriads of interlocking branches made a lovely, filmy mauve curtain up against the sky.

To right and left of the great central avenue the open-air restaurants had not opened their shutters yet. Men in checked aprons were wiping the dew off the tables and setting the chairs to rights. Overhead there was a concert of chirruping and a fluttering of wings; the air of spring was everywhere. Litta, tempted by the peace of the woodland, turned off from the main alley and wandered down the paths bordered by chestnut coppice. She came to a little clearing where there was soft, young turf all starred over with white anemones. And on one side, facing the view over distant woodland and hills, and nestling against a background of chestnut coppice, there was a small, circular pavilion, stone-built and of classical design, with two or three steps leading up to a seat, surmounted by a broken piece of statuary. Here the scent of young vegetation was sweet and pungent, and all around there was the fluttering sound of young things, glad to be alive, and uttering their pæan of praise to the sun for the warmth of his kiss.

And Litta sighed with all the gaiety suddenly gone out of her heart The little pavilion looked cool and inviting; she went up the steps and sank down on the seat, feeling unaccountably

weary. Of what good was youth and health, and a long vista of years before her, if throughout those years she had to wander through life alone? —she, who yearned so passionately for happiness! so ardently for love! There, in front of her, in the dust of the path, two little sparrows were chattering and fluttering and preening their feathers, quarrelling and chattering and kissing. Litta watched them with tear-filled eyes. And presently they flew away, the little hen in front, the proud little cock after her. They were building a nest probably: somewhere under the eaves of a tumbledown shed, a nest, a home! Those little dusty sparrows were immeasurably rich because they could chirrup together and flutter their wings in each other's company and because they were building a home for themselves

How silent the place seemed, and how lonely! Now that the sparrows had gone, there were no other soft throats to make music to the sun. And Litta, sitting there in the shadow, with the green glade before her, the leafy wood all around, and the starry anemones at her feet, felt as if her soul too was now a silent place, with just the longing in it that she might soon wake from this lonely night and hear a voice that would make music to her heart

LITTA had taken off her hat and leaned her head against the broken statue and closed her eyes; the air was soft and so full of sweet, heady odours that drowsiness overtook her and for at least a few minutes she must actually have been asleep.

Then, suddenly, something roused her; she sat up wide-eyed, a little scared, and saw Phil coming up the steps towards her. Her first instinct was to flee But the moment she moved, he was beside her.

"Don't go," he said, and for some undefinable reason she remained where she was.

Presently he asked, "May I sit down?" and she edged away as far as she could to the edge of the seat. She murmured coolly, "If you like," and he sat down at some little distance from her, in his customary attitude, leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, and his hands loosely clasped together. Litta had made up her mind that she would remain obstinately silent. What she had dreaded most had come to pass. Phil was here, and he would probably ask uncomfortable questions to which she would be compelled to reply. But if there was going to be a battle between them, let him, she thought, open fire.

In the meanwhile, quite unconsciously, she was scrutinising him. She could only see the top of his head with the smooth brown hair, and the outline of his jaw and chin. But even so she thought him altered. Older, somehow! And so extraordinarily still and silent. He scarcely

seemed to breathe, whilst she felt that her own breath came and went in quick, short gasps. This could not mean that she was in any way afraid, but to gasp like this was certainly very uncomfortable.

At last the silence got on Litta's nerves. She must either say something or scream, though she still felt that for some unaccountable reason she could not run away. Silent, bent, and motionless, Phil seemed to hold her, rooted to the spot Then suddenly she put the query to him that for the last minute or so had been agitating her mind:

"How did you find me?"

Another moment of silence. Phil raised his head and gazed straight out before him:

"I saw your train," he replied coolly, "steam into the station last night."

"But how did you know I should come to Vienna?"

The ghost of a smile stole round his lips

"Two and two," he said, "are not very difficult to put together. They also have a way of making four."

"Which means?"

"You knew that your friend must be travelling through Vienna I guessed that you would make another effort to persuade her to listen to you"

"And so you thought of spying upon me," she retorted.

"Hardly that, I think," he rejoined good-humouredly. "I only wished to know where I could find you"

"And you watched me?"

"Yes"

"Followed me here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Only because I wished for an opportunity to tell you that I am staying at the Bristol, and that I shall remain there, at your service, if you want me——"

"I know of nothing less likely," she said coldly.

"I shall remain there," he reiterated slowly, without heeding the interruption, "ready to accompany you home as soon as you wish."

"Then I am afraid that you are wasting your time," she retorted, speaking as slowly, as deliberately as he had done.

"What do you mean by that, exactly?" he asked and looked her now square in the face.

"That it would be best for us both," she replied—"at any rate, I think so—if I went back to my own people . for a time"

"These last words are a concession, I suppose. What you mean is that you have decided to leave me—altogether."

"Put it that way, if you like"

"Why?"

She made no reply, but sat with head bent, and with the fingers of her right hand twirling the wedding ring on her left. One rebellious curl, ruddier than chestnut buds, had fallen across her forehead, and one ray of sunshine, coming through a chink in the stonework, glinted on it like gold After awhile he reiterated insistently: "Why?"

"Because," she said, suddenly raising her head

and meeting his questioning eyes, "because it is no use going on as we have done these past two years. We only make each other wretched. We don't understand one another, you'll admit. When we married, we made a pact of friendship which was to last all our lives, but it has become a dead letter seemingly."

"Not as far as I am concerned," he said slowly, when she paused because some very tiresome tears, which she tried very hard to swallow, were making her voice husky. "I have kept loyally to our pact; but there can be no friendship without confidence, and you never gave me yours, remember."

"I don't know that I remember that," she retorted defiantly. "Did you ever give me yours? Did you ever try to understand that I wanted to be your friend, your companion? That I was ready to enter into all your schemes, your studies, your career? Not a bit of it. It was all right at first. We were very chummy all through that first spring and summer. Then your cousin died, we went to England, Lady Stick-in-the-Mud and Mrs Tomnoddy got in the way, and from that moment you simply shut me out of your life. Apparently, though I was all right for the wife of a young nobody, I was not good enough to be the mistress of Chart Court and the wife of Sir Philip Chartley, Bart You were surrounded by your relations Oh! those relations! How I hated them! and how they loathed me! They looked upon me as so much dirt under their feet——"

Philip had listened without attempting to in-

terrupt while Litta seemed to be pouring out the very floodgates of her resentment, which she had kept in check for so long. Now when she paused, just because she was out of breath, he only said coolly:

"Do you really mean to tell me that you want to leave me just because you don't care for my relations?"

"It is they who came between us."

"In what way?" Then as she made no reply, and still wore that little air of defiance, he added:

"Anyway, they can't interfere with your comforts now. They are never likely to come to Pertuis, and——"

"And," she broke in hotly, "you never thought that I was good enough to associate with them"

"What makes you say that?"

"I'll tell you I say it because the moment your relations started to hang about you, you changed—well, you did not seem the same man at all. We'd really had a lovely time at Santa Rosa. We were beginning to understand one another. We got very chummy, and I was beginning to care for you—really. I can't say that I was actually falling in love with you, because André de Malsabre's treachery still rankled, and I concluded that all men were beasts; but I thought, somehow, that you were different, only——"

"Only you thought that you would have a little game with me," he broke in, with just the suspicion of tremor in his voice, "go on making a fool of me as you had done from the first. Malsabre behaved like a cad, and because one man had

wounded your vanity and was out of your reach, you wanted to make the next poor wretch suffer for it."

"That's not true," she protested. "I promised to be your chum, your companion. André had hurt me too much for me ever to love again—you know that——"

"Does a man ever know that, do you think?"

"At any rate, I thought you understood. And then you promised——"

"Yes! That's true! I promised. You punished me cruelly enough the only time I broke my word."

"I didn't mean to be cruel. But you frightened me."

"Yes," he said with a short impatient sigh. "You said so at the time. I was only a poor fool, maddened with love, the smell of spring was in the air, and the lilies—— I don't suppose you remember the lilies, but the scent of them was so sweet, they made my very bones ache with longing for you My God! how beautiful you were! And then there was the moonlight, and in the garden in the old walnut tree, that nightingale —— I don't suppose you remember," he reiterated.

How strange his voice sounded. Calm, of course Everything about Phil was always calm Unemotional And yet the voice was strange; as if something hurt him very, very much. He spoke like a man in pain Litta was not going to tell him that she remembered that night, the scent of the lilies, the nightingale, and—and everything Phil had taken her unawares, and

she had almost yielded. Almost given him her lips to kiss. That was all he had asked for, just a kiss. But he had scared her. She had suddenly remembered André and what beasts all men were. Even Philip, who had sworn to worship her for herself alone and never ask for anything but the right to worship, to give her his name and his protection—even he was going to fail her. She remembered the terrible impulse that prompted her then and there to tell him everything; to hold up her lips to his and then to murmur: "I am not the woman you think I am. I am not a madonna! I am just a common thief! A thief who has been in prison, the daughter of a convict, the scum of the earth. Now then, kiss me if you want to!"

But she hadn't done it. She hadn't the pluck to do it. In his deep-set eyes that looked down on her, while she stood, resisting, in his arms, there had shone such passionate worship that she couldn't do it. And since she had not the pluck to tell him everything, to see the look of worship in his eyes turn to contempt, she just pushed him away from her, turned from him and fled to the loneliness of her own room, and for the rest of the time which they spent at Santa Rosa she had pleaded a headache whenever he asked her to come for a row on the bay, and avoided him, whenever she saw him strolling alone in the garden

And soon after that came the journey to England, and the relations, and—and the end of everything Phil had changed Never since then had she seen that look of worship in his eyes, never again had he captured her and held her in his arms,

demanding that kiss which was his by right. He had ceased to care and they had drifted apart, and she had been eating out her heart since then in vain regrets

"It is because I do remember everything," she said at last, "and because it hurts me to remember, that I feel it would be best for us to part"

"You hate me so much as all that?" he asked

"Oh! hate is rather a hectic word, isn't it?" she said with a nervous laugh "We don't understand one another, that's all about it."

"And what do you propose to do?"

"How do you mean?"

"How do you propose to map out your future? When you have left me where will you go?"

"To my own people," she replied with that same little air of obstinacy. "You needn't be afraid——"

"I am not," he broke in quickly, and a quaint smile chased away for a moment the sterner lines of his face

"Very well, then?" she queried

"Only that you can't do it—that's all."

"Can't do what?"

"Go away and leave me, your husband, just because you don't like my relations"

"Oh! you know quite well that that is not the reason"

"No!" he admitted "I know Then it is because you hate me?"

"Because I am wretched and miserable," she cried. "Because I am not a wooden dummy without a heart and without a soul, but only a poor thing starving for love"

up at him with a kind of challenge in her violet eyes

"I?" he murmured.

And suddenly, without any warning, he was quite close to her, one arm resting on the back of the seat, one knee nearly touching the ground. "I?" he reiterated with a sigh of passionate longing. "I could as soon give up drawing breath as to attempt to forget you Every waking hour of my life and every sleeping hour are filled with dreams of you. Don't go, Litta," he cried, for she had jumped up to her feet, scared by this sudden revelation. His arms closed round her; half crouching, half kneeling, he held her so tight that she could not struggle, and felt as if her body would be crushed in this mad, this passionate embrace. "Don't go!" he pleaded, scarce above his breath, his voice tremulous and husky. "Come back with me to Italy. Let us forget everything and just start life again I'll teach you how to love, Litta. It is springtime now at Santa Rosa, and we'll go out on the bay by moonlight, and stroll home along the beach, and the soft air will make your dear little curls flutter against my cheek Litta! my little Litta! don't go from me. Let me take you back to Santa Rosa. Once I have you there, I'll never let you go again I am going to teach you how good it is to love, and when the nightingale sings again in the old walnut tree, I will teach you how good it is to kiss"

Litta stood quite still, quite still, while his arms slid all down her body till they clasped her knees. The air about her vibrated with bird-song and

a soft breeze made music in the trees. She felt like a woman in a dream, and in front of her, in the mist laden sky, she saw visions, as of a Celestial City, of the little villa over in Italy perched upon the hill, with the walnut tree at the end of the garden, through the branches of which the honey-coloured moon peeped at the nightingale singing to its little mate. The world seemed to fall away from her; she felt as if she were in a drugged sleep And, looking down, she just saw the top of Phil's head, with the smooth brown hair, and his broad shoulders bent, just above her knees. And somehow she knew that he too was in a drugged sleep. Not really alive. That they were both of them just the creation of a dream. And all that Litta was conscious of was an insane desire that time should stand still, that she should go on for ever and ever standing like this, in a drugged sleep—dreaming—and feel her knees so firmly shackled that she could not run away.

Phil's voice—the dream voice—had been stilled long ago, but Litta did not wake. Her hand fell limp and mechanical to her side and came to rest on the top of Phil's head. In her dream she stroked the smooth, brown hair slowly, gently. Bitterness and resentment had all gone; they too were drugged and asleep.

And suddenly she felt something scorching her hands, and her fingers, which were held in a strong, searing clasp, were wet as with tears.

"Yes," Sir Philip replied. "I guessed you were."

"Ah! that makes things much more comfortable, don't it? You won't mind my telling you, then, that your taking her ladyship home, as you call it, will depend on whether she'll go with you. Won't it?"

"Of course it will."

"And you think she'll come?"

"I have no doubt whatever about it," was Sir Philip's quiet retort.

"Of course you haven't," Bill assented lustily. "Not any doubt whatever. Just so Now," he went on, and with the tip of his little finger he flicked the ash off his cigar, "would it surprise you very much if I were to tell you that her ladyship ain't coming home with you at all?"

"That is for her to decide," Sir Philip said simply.

"You are right there, my lord," Bill agreed with another dry chuckle. "No hurry, you know The kid she'll just nip back to the hotel now, with old Kilts, and your lordship and I can follow on and have a nice little bit of a talk about it on the way."

"Quite unnecessary," Sir Philip retorted coolly "Lady Chartley will make her own arrangements"

"Quite right!—quite right!" Bill rejoined with perfect good-humour. "Hear that, kid? Your ladyship will make your own arrangements. That'll be after you've seen your friend the Princess. My Gawd!" he went on with a lusty laugh,

"to think of you and all these grand folk! You have it done it proper, haven't you, kid?"

But Litta no longer heard him She had only caught the two words "the Princess!" In her dream she had—God help her!—forgotten all about Gabrielle, and her promise to her father. Heavens above! what had happened? She was only just able to gasp the one word:

"Gabrielle?"

"Why, of course," her father rejoined, still with wonderful good-humour. "I haven't had time to tell you, me talking so affably with his lordship. But they were just off to Budapest, the Princess and Paul. Lucky, Kilts found them in time, eh, kid? Well! you run along, you'll just catch her. Kilts hasn't told her yet; he thought he'd wait till you were there. Better? what? He is soft-hearted, is old Kilts. He don't half like the job, but your being there'll make that all right for your friend. Eh, kid?"

Slowly, while her father spoke, Litta had turned in order to look at Phil. She could see him standing there, rigid, as always, and uncompromising, not in any way like a dream-creature or a man in a drugged sleep Though he hardly moved a muscle—it was never Phil's way to move much—he was very much alive, and she was aware of the tense expression on his face, as he tried to get the inner meaning of what her father was saying. His eyes narrowed until they were mere slits, and the lines around his mouth and chin hardened, as they had often done during that first autumn at Chart Court when she, Litta

had aimed a more than usually cruel shaft at him.

When Bill had finished speaking, Sir Philip turned to his wife:

"Well, Litta!" he said coolly, "which is it to be?"

"You haven't much time to make up your mind, kid," her father broke in. "Paul is going by the first afternoon train. He don't know nothing, you see, and so if Kilts says nothing, why—— You understand, don't you, kid?"

Litta did understand. In effect the old man was saying to her: "If you leave me now, and go back to *him*, we go on with the Russian business; for that is the bargain, ain't it, kid?" He didn't say this in so many words—at least, Litta did not actually hear him—but in effect that was what he was saying.

He was reminding her of the bargain—that was it. If she went back to him. then he would sacrifice the Russian business. Not otherwise The very way in which he thrust the cigar into his mouth and puffed away at it, with his hands in his pockets and his small beady black eyes fixed upon her, showed her quite plainly that he was prepared to give up the Russian business even at this eleventh hour, and with its huge monetary profits, or else her, Litta—but not both.

But that was quite right. She had been a willing party to the bargain, and nothing whatever had occurred to make her wish to go back on it Nothing whatever. And there was always Gabrielle to think of. And now Kilts was saying in his quiet, business-like way:

"We shan't have any too much time. If we miss them now, it'd be the devil to get hold of them at Budapest. Paul says they are going straight through to the frontier."

And her father, slow of speech and practical, went on with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the great avenue "You can pick up a taxi, and be at the Imperial in a jiffy. But you'll have to hurry."

"Come along, kid," Kilts concluded. And Litta, without glancing at any of the men, mechanically picked up her hat, and with it in her hand prepared to go with Kilts. Just as she was on the point of going down the pavilion steps, she heard Phil's voice suddenly; but it sounded muffled, somehow, and unfamiliar, and only vaguely did she catch the drift of what he was saying.

"You are not going, Litta!" It did not sound like a question. More like a statement of an indisputable fact—which, of course, was foolish, because there was no question about it. If she didn't keep to her share of the bargain, what would happen to Gabrielle? Already she was running it late, Gabrielle was on her way to Russia. Phil ought to know that and realise that there was no question about it Time was no longer standing still, as it did just before father and Kilts came and chased away the dream

So she met Phil's eyes quite squarely and straight, and said coolly:

"Of course I am going, Phil. I shall miss Gabrielle if I don't go."

"You'll see Gabrielle, of course," Phil said

equally coolly. "I quite understand that. But when you have seen her——?"

"When I've seen her?" she asked vaguely.

"You'll come back with me—to Santa Rosa?"

She shook her head. "No!" she said. "When I've seen Gabrielle, I am going back to my own people. You remember," she insisted with a little catch in her throat, "I told you that it would be best—for both of us."

Then she ran down the pavilion steps and walked away quickly across the clearing, closely followed by Kilts.

"So that's that, ain't it, my lord?" Bill's lusty voice, with its dry chuckle, broke the silence that ensued.

Sir Philip made no reply. He was still standing in the shadow inside the pavilion, looking down on the squat, burl[illegible]re of the ex-convict. Bill, puffing away at h[illegible] ellent Havana, seemed in no hurry to go.

"What abomina[illegible]rgain did you strike with her?" Sir Phili[illegible]ded abruptly.

"Eh?" Bill c[illegible]landly. "What?"

"You heard [illegible]said all right. I want to know what kir[illegible] knife you are holding to my wife's thr[illegible]

Bill gave a [illegible] laugh. He was enjoying this

"Knife?" [illegible]aid. "Who says I am holding a knife to [illegible] kid's throat? Bless her little heart!"

" I say that you are holding a knife to her throat. She talks of leaving me because of some filthy bargain you've struck with her. What is it?"

"Hold on! Hold on, my lord," Bill retorted, and slowly mounted the steps of the pavilion in order, no doubt, to be more on a level with this man who was trying to bully him "You've got no right to talk to me like that. I am——"

"I know just what you are," Phil broke in quietly. "And I know all about you. The police records have given me all the information I wanted So don't trouble to give me your own account of yourself. You'd be wasting time"

"I am your wife's father anyway, my lord," Bill retorted drily

"So you are, bad luck to it!"

"And she's meant more to me, has the kid, than she's ever meant to you. And your lordship can put that in your pipe and smoke it"

"Are you by any chance trying to tell me that you have any affection for Litta?"

"I'm telling you that I'm her father and that she's all the world to me—so there!"

The man was in earnest—there was no question of that. In the small deep-set eyes, drawn closely together under the heavy brows, there had suddenly darted a gleam of fierce and uncontrolled passion. With a strange sinking of the heart, Philip realised that he spoke the truth. The fight would be more tough, more strenuous, than he had thought it possible a moment ago. here was no venal opponent who could be bought or driven off by an all-powerful cheque-book The whole

attitude of the man, the glow in the small beady black eyes, the very way in which he raised the cigar to his lips, proclaimed an obstinacy of temperament and a fierce egoism that no amount of bribery would shake. For a few seconds Philip remained silent, with lips tightly set and hands clenched, contemplating this formidable rival who had suddenly become almost unattackable under the shield of his passionate devotion to his child. Bill looked him squarely in the face, and slowly a gleam of triumph crept into his eyes. He felt his strength, he knew that his position was impregnable, all his life he had held to the theory that possession was nine parts of the law: the kid was his child, she was his, and he believed her to have been unhappy. Now he had her, he was not going to let her go again. What chance, he would like to know, would this toff have against him, now that he, Bill, had the kid?

"Very well!" Phil said abruptly, after a moment or two. "You tell me that Litta is all the world to you. I believe you——"

"No thanks, my lord," Bill broke in with a sneer.

"I do believe," Phil went on calmly, not heeding the interruption, "that in your way you have as much affection for her as you can find room for in your crooked nature. But in that case, you must see for yourself that by leaving me and returning to you she will be going back to a sordid life which she will loathe now as much and more than she did when she ran away from it. You can't wish that, man!" Philip insisted. "You can't! Not if you care for her, as you say you

do. You must wish to see her happy, with an assured future before her——"

"It is because I do wish to see the kid happy, my lord," Bill retorted slowly, "that I am going to take her away from you. Never mind about the future She's going to be happy now. See!"

And Bill sat down as if to give an air of finality to what he was saying. He took off his hat, laid it on the seat beside him, and resting his two hands on his knees, he went on with slow deliberation:

"Let me tell you this, my fine gentleman. The kid's fed up with you and all your grand folk. She's coming back to her old father because that's where she belongs Have you made her happy? No! Well, I am going to bring back the smiles on her pretty face They've all gone since she went away from me."

And Philip, looking down on the harsh, furrowed face, almost repellent with its lines of callousness and brutality, felt in his heart a sudden pang of remorse Roughly as the man had put it, spiteful, no doubt, as had been his motive, there was some truth in what he said It was, therefore, in a much more calm and conciliatory spirit that he went on:

"Look here, man! Litta, I suppose, has confided to you that there has, unfortunately, been a prolonged misunderstanding between us."

"I don't know that she has," Bill rejoined drily; "but I guessed there was something of the sort, from what she said."

"It was my fault, I dare say. I found out by chance what I felt she ought to have told me long ago."

"About me, you mean?"

"And herself."

"Don't blame her for that, my lord," Bill protested with a savage oath. "The kid never ought to have gone to gaol. We did the dirty on her."

"You needn't tell me. I know every detail of that miserable story. A man who had once been in the police at Yeominster and been turned out for misconduct, spotted my poor little Litta when we were in Rutlandshire, and he thought that he could do a lucrative little bit of blackmail by coming to me with the tale."

"Tell me the man's name," Bill broke in calmly. "I'll find the damned blackguard and kill him."

"You needn't trouble to do that. I gave him enough money with which to drink himself to death. And he's done it."

"I'm sorry for that," Bill remarked drily.

"Anyway, once I had the clue, I followed it up What I felt was that Litta should have told me herself. She ought to have trusted me."

"And I suppose you were for turning her out o' doors, bag and baggage."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Well? Didn't yer?" Bill queried blandly.

"You miserable idiot!" Phil commented with a shrug. "Can't you understand that I don't care a rap who or what she is. She is my wife now, whatever she was before, and I——" He pulled himself together just in time, before words escaped him which he had never spoken before to any living soul; and then he went on with his usual calm deliberation: "What I meant to say was that

that was the only cause of our estrangement I found that Litta did not trust me, and I felt bitterly hurt"

"And so," Bill rejoined complacently, "you turned on her just because you felt hurt. Well, well! I suppose that's your way. Funny, it seems to me! Now, if you'd turned her out o' doors, as I said, bag and baggage, I couldn't have blamed yer. It can't be pleasant for a gentleman of your sort to find out that your wife has done her bit in gaol."

"Say that again, man," Phil broke in with quiet emphasis, "and I'll break your jaw for you."

But Bill's good-humour was not to be disturbed by any threat of violence.

"There you are!" he said, coolly puffing at his cigar, "losing your temper now. What good is that going to do yer? The kid is fed up with you, and she's coming home with me."

"I swear by God she is not."

"How are you going to stop her?" the other retorted with a sneer.

"That's my business. But you can take it from me that whatever hold you've got on my wife—my wife, you understand?—I'll find it out. And I'll fight you for her, inch by inch: do you hear?"

"Oh! I hear yer, my lord," Bill retorted imperturbably. "For myself, I like a good fight. And we'll soon see who is the better man, my lord—you or I."

But Philip had had his say. It was never his way to say much. So now he just picked up his hat and went down the steps of the pavilion and then across the clearing.

Bill watched him for a few seconds, until his tall figure disappeared down a path that cut through the chestnut coppice. And Bill gave one or two chuckles. On the whole, he was not afraid. The kid was fed up with all these swells, and though she might cut up rough for a bit, when she found that her blessed Princess was out of everyone's reach, she would soon come round to her old father.

She was fed up with the lot of them—she said so. Why, the way she went off with Kilts just now showed that she was fed up and she didn't care.

And Bill sat on for a time in the pavilion puffing meditatively at his cigar. Presently he looked at his watch. It was close on luncheon time, so he threw away the stump, and picking up his hat, he made his way back into the town.

The Celestial City *XXIII*

THE house of Peter Abramovitch Stanko, people's commissar for the district of Ostolga in the province of Koursk, was the finest in the little township. In the days of autocracy and aristocratic tyranny it had belonged to the Bobrinskys, who owned all the land round about as well as most of the property in Ostolga, and the administrator of the estate, who was an impoverished cousin of the Prince, used to live in that fine house. It was fine in the way that it had a story above the ground-

floor and large rooms with big windows that could open and shut. There were also two rooms in each of which there was a huge painted tub, bigger than any pail a people's commissar had ever seen, and it seems that, in the days of autocracy and tyranny, aristocrats would go into these rooms and wash themselves in these huge, long, painted pails, into which water—hot water if you lighted a fire down below—flowed in through polished taps: just, mind you, as if the pump out in the yard wasn't good enough to take the grime off any man's face. It proved that these aristocrats were very dirty people, or they wouldn't need such special places in which to wash.

In addition to all that finery, the house also had a garden, in which at one time zinnias and nasturtium, blue delphiniums and orange marigold, made riots of colour, whilst roses grew in amazing profusion. Now it was nothing but a tangle of coarse grass and thistle, which, of course, didn't matter in the least, because a people's commissar had other far more important things to do than to bother about such unproductive things as flowers.

But the house being such a fine one, well stocked with furniture, what more natural than that the people's commissar should occupy it? What more natural also than that he should supplement the furniture that was there with other far more valuable pieces which had stood in the château of the Bobrinskys a couple of versts on the other side of Ostolga? and not only with pieces of furniture, but with statues and pictures and clocks and all sorts of rubbish which were worth a lot of money,

seemingly. Not that Peter Abramovitch cared a kick on the shins for anything of that sort, but why shouldn't he have them? For one thing, Jew and German traders who wanted permits to go through the district, and had to apply for these to Peter Abramovitch, could easily be made to pay large sums for the stuff, which they then sold, it seems, to wealthy Germans or even Americans Not that Peter Abramovitch cared what became of the things after he had sold them. He had the money for them, and that was all that concerned him.

On the ground-floor, with the windows on a level with the street, there was a large room in which Peter Abramovitch transacted the business of the district. He knew a lot about business, because at one time he had acted as deputy administrator to the Bobrinskys, and it was in this same room that he had sat year in and year out at his desk, being tyrannised over by the head administrator. It was nice to look up at the walls, which once were bare and white-washed, and now were hung all over with pictures in gold frames, ready for the German or Jew dealer to buy and send to Berlin or to New York. It was still nicer to sit in an armchair all covered in crimson silk, one that had a tall back, and gilt lions at the ends of its arms, and then to think of that hard office chair, and the endless rows of figures and of the inkstains all over one's hands. Now the room was so full of chairs and tables, of sofas and cabinets and carpets, that it was very difficult to move about without upsetting something. Not that Peter Abramovitch cared about the things, I repeat, but

their presence gave him a feeling of grandeur and of power.

And it was in this room that he transacted the business of the district; here that he distributed permits, passports, and visas, and administered his own notions of justice, for Peter Abramovitch Stanko was justice of the peace as well as people's commissar, and all matters of dispute had to be settled before him and all transgressions against the law were summarily dealt with by him. In order to give importance to his decisions, and also in order to impress every stranger who came into the district, he transacted all his business with doors wide open, so that those who were waiting in the passage for their turn to enter the great man's presence could see and hear how other petitioners or other delinquents were being dealt with This idea of a kind of open court of justice gave Peter Abramovitch Stanko a further feeling of majesty, a feeling that he was acting up to the highest Communistic ideals

But the most wonderful feeling of all he got when the Princess Bobrinsky—that is to say, she had been the Princess Bobrinsky once, but now all that stuff and nonsense about titles was abolished and she was just comrade Gabrielle Bobrinsky—sat in this same room, on a high, uncomfortable stool the other side of his desk, while he, Peter Abramovitch, once a mere deputy administrator, lounged in the wonderful armchair with the gilt lions, and listened to what she had to say. He listened, that is to say, in the intervals of picking his teeth or looking through some papers which

appeared far more important than the affairs of this Gabrielle Bobrinsky.

"All the sons and daughters of Russia are equal in the sight of the government," he had said grandiloquently as he tossed aside, with a gesture indicative of contempt, the card bearing her name and rank which she had sent in to him. "Rank?" he went on pompously, "titles? We, who represent the people, no longer recognise them."

Having said this, he called peremptorily for Aaron Mosenthal; whereupon a lean Jew in greasy gabardine, and with a skull-cap above his lanky, black locks, pushed his way through the crowd which had assembled outside the open door, trying to get a glimpse of the great man and of the petitioner, who had been known to most of them once as Princess Bobrinsky.

Peter Abramovitch gave the Jew some lengthy directions about other, wholly irrelevant matters; then, after Mosenthal had gone, he continued to busy himself with papers, picking up one and then the other, scribbling some notes, perusing others, anything in fact to keep the woman waiting and, he hoped, on tenterhooks—the same woman whose hand he had so often kissed when he was in her service. He hoped that she would say something in answer to his taunt about rank and titles, but she said nothing; just sat there on the high, uncomfortable stool, not looking at any of the pictures, the clocks, or bits of furniture which had once adorned her home.

Over by the open door, on another equally high and equally uncomfortable stool, sat Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine, who had accompanied the Prin-

cess Bobrinsky across the continent of Europe as her courier When first he had entered the room, three respectful paces behind the Princess, Peter Abramovitch and he had exchanged one quick glance of greeting; but since then Paul Sergine had kept his dark, almond-shaped eyes fixed immovably on the floor.

And thus some ten minutes went by, with scarcely a sound to break the silence in the room. The crowd out in the passage was far too deeply awed to venture on any sound save that of an occasional discreet cough; even the fretful puling of an infant was quickly suppressed. At intervals the people's commissar would noisily clear his throat and expectorate equally noisily on the Aubusson carpet which had come out of Princess Bobrinsky's boudoir. This act also gave him a pleasant feeling of grandeur and power. With the windows hermetically shut, the open doorway blocked up by a group of perspiring humans, the room filled with furniture and tapestries to overflowing, and a blazing fire roaring up the chimney of the huge earthenware stove, the atmosphere in the room was insufferable. From time to time Gabrielle would raise her handkerchief to her face to wipe the tiny beads of perspiration that rose round her delicately shaped nostrils. The people's commissar, seeing this gesture, attributed it to anxiety and perhaps fear on her part, which further accentuated the pleasant feeling of grandeur and of power.

However, after about ten minutes, Peter Abramovitch seemed to tire of rattling papers aimlessly. He was anxious to get to this business which had been planned in Jakob Grossman's isba

seven months ago So presently he touched the hand-bell again, and Aaron Mosenthal once more elbowed his way into the room.

"That letter of comrade Bobrinsky," the commissar said, lounging, tooth-pick in hand, in the silk-covered armchair. "What have we done with it?"

Aaron Mosenthal didn't know, and the commissar then proceeded to search with lofty indifference through his papers. Finally, out of the pocket of his black coat he drew a very creased and very dirty letter, which he extracted out of its envelope and then read through leisurely. When he had finished reading the letter, he threw it down on the desk, leaned back in his chair, and treated the Princess Gabrielle Bobrinsky to an insolent stare.

"If everything that you tell me in this letter is true," he said drily, "I dare say that I shall be able to do something for you"

A sigh, as of immense relief, rose to Gabrielle's lips; but, fortunately for her dignity, she was able to repress it, and it was in a perfectly calm and even tone that she said in reply:

"Everything that I have told you in my letter is absolutely true. My husband, Prince Bobrinsky——"

But a vigorous thump on the desk from the clenched fist of the people's commissar drowned the next words which she spoke

"Stop that!" Peter Abramovitch shouted at the top of his voice "How many times must I tell you that we have no damned Princes in Russia

now. Rank and titles are the inventions of tyrants. The people will have none of them."

"Your Excellency must excuse me," Gabrielle said meekly. "I was forgetting."

And the people's commissar, all unconscious of the irony, was hugely satisfied to hear himself addressed as "Your Excellency" by this aristocrat, whose bread he had eaten for so long.

"Continue!" he said loftily.

"My husband," Gabrielle resumed in the same calm monotone, "managed to let me know, before —before he was taken prisoner, what he had done with certain securities and jewellery, which he had withdrawn from the bank at Petrograd."

"Petrograd?" Peter Abramovitch queried blandly. "What's that?"

Then as Gabrielle looked at him not quite understanding what he was driving at, but vaguely scenting a taunt, he said sternly:

"Leningrad, you mean, comrade."

"Leningrad, of course," Gabrielle murmured. "I was forgetting."

"What?" he sneered. "Again?"

"We are creatures of habit, Excellency," she said meekly. "You must pardon me. I have lived so much abroad."

"Good Russians do not live abroad," he rejoined pompously. "Their own country is good enough for them"

"That is why I have returned, your Excellency."

"And that's a lie," was the commissar's insc retort; and when he saw the flush of in

which spread over Gabrielle's pale cheeks, he laughed, hugely enjoying the situation.

"Well, well!" he said with affected good-humour, "we won't quarrel about that. You've come back to Russia, and here you are! and now you are asking Peter Abramovitch—poor, down-trodden little Peter Abramovitch, who used to run after you when you walked down the street of Ostolga, begging you to allow him to kiss your hand—you are asking him to put his patriotism in his pocket and to help you get your husband out of prison. Well, well! times have changed, haven't they, comrade?"

"Yes, they have changed, Peter Abramovitch," Gabrielle rejoined calmly, and looked the arrogant creature fearlessly in the face. Before her steady gaze he lowered his eyes, but only for a second or two. Between these two there had flitted a vision of ten years ago, when an uncouth young man had begged a tender-hearted woman to intercede for his mother, who, caught out in the act of thieving, would have been convicted and sent to prison but for her intervention. The vision quickly passed away, but not before each of them knew that the other's memory had conjured it.

"Enough talking now," Peter Abramovitch said suddenly, after a moment's silence. "Let's get to business. Aaron Mosenthal," he shouted, "shut the doors and clear that rabble out of the house, I can't see anyone now till after dinner."

Mosenthal promptly obeyed. With vigorous play of the elbows and an occasional recourse to the toe of his boot, he pushed the disappointed crowd out of the house. Muttering under their

breath—they dared not protest openly—they allowed themselves to be driven out like a lot of sheep. All but one man, better dressed than the others and obviously a stranger, who lingered in the rear of the throng. He had contrived to whisper in Mosenthal's ear: "I have a train to catch in the afternoon. I must see the commissar for the permit" And he slipped a wad of greasy notes into the Jew's willing hand. "If I see the commissar before noon," he went on when the last of the "rabble" had dispersed, "there'll be fifty roubles for you and two hundred for him." Whereupon Aaron Mosenthal thrust the wad of notes into the pocket of his gabardine, and shrugged his shoulders to indicate that the stranger was welcome to remain in this draughty passage and await the pleasure of the people's commissar. Then he proceeded to close the doors that gave on the inner sanctum. Having done that, he tried to worm his way back into the room Had he not also a stake in this affair of the Bobrinsky's jewels? and though one ought to trust one's associates, it would perhaps be better if—— But Peter Abramovitch summarily ordered him out of his presence, and such was the power of the man's personality that Mosenthal dared not disobey. With the characteristic meekness of his race he slipped out of the room and closed the doors behind him. That is to say, he closed them, but he did not close the latch, and there was just a tiny, narrow chink through which the commissar's harsh voice and Gabrielle Bobrinsky's gentle monotone could easily reach his ear.

FORTUNATELY for Aaron Mosenthal, the people's commissar was now too deeply absorbed in the business on hand to notice the tell-tale little chink. He was leaning against the tall back of the silk-covered chair, tooth-pick in hand, serene, lofty, indifferent, as became a man who held human lives and human liberty in the hollow of his hand.

"Now, then," he queried roughly of the gentle, apparently impassive woman before him, "what is it you want?"

"My husband's freedom," she replied quietly, "and passports to get us both out of Russia."

"You don't want much, do you?" the commissar retorted with a sneer.

"I am willing to pay for what I want," was Gabrielle's calm reply.

"How much?"

"Two-thirds of the value of the securities and jewellery of which I told you in my letter."

"The securities are probably worthless."

"Perhaps," she admitted. "But the jewellery is very valuable."

"Where is it?"

"At the Scandinavian Bank at Kharkoff."

Peter Abramovitch frowned. He and his associates, when they planned the affair of the Bobrinsky jewels, had not reckoned on having to deal with a bank Looking over and beyond Gabrielle, he caught Paul Sergine's eyes fixed somewhat mockingly upon him However, this slight contretemps was not likely to make any

very great difference in the business, and less than a second later he went on calmly:

"You mean that Cyril Bobrinsky, your husband, deposited a lot of worthless securities and some jewellery at the Scandinavian Bank in Kharkoff?"

"My husband," Gabrielle rejoined firmly, "deposited jewels which were valued before the war at eight million roubles, and also some securities which certainly are not worthless, in the Scandinavian Bank at Kharkoff. They are packed in a sealed case, and deposited in the joint names of my husband and myself, to be given up to either of us on demand."

"Against a receipt?"

"Against a receipt."

"Where is it?"

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders.

"Lost or destroyed, I imagine, with all my husband's papers and belongings, when he was made prisoner by your armies"

"So you have no proof that your jewellery and so on are where you say. The Scandinavian Bank——"

"The Scandinavian Bank," Gabrielle broke in quickly, "is under the management of a man of the highest integrity, M. de Klingspor, a Swedish gentleman who no doubt is known to you When my husband left his valuables at the bank, M de Klingspor entered the transaction in his presence, in the book specially kept for that purpose, as is customary in a good many European banks and in all the English ones. These entries stand in lieu of receipt."

"And you think," Peter Abramovitch queried with a sneer, "that this Swede, Klingspor, or whatever you call him, will give up to you goods worth millions, for which you hold no receipt?"

"I am quite sure that he will," Gabrielle replied. "The Bank is a Scandinavian one, its manager a Swede," she added simply.

"Hm!" the commissar muttered, choosing to ignore the insinuation. "But you seem to forget, comrade, that we don't want your wonderful Swede to give the valuables up to you, but to hand them over to me."

"The whole thing can be transacted in M. de Klingspor's office," Gabrielle rejoined; "you can accompany me and my husband to Kharkoff. M. de Klingspor will place the jewellery and securities before you, and in exchange for the necessary passports and permits he will hand you over, at our request, two-thirds of the value of whatever is found inside the sealed case."

Once more Peter Abramovitch looked across at Paul Sergine. He would have given a great deal for Paul's advice on the situation; but those almond-shaped eyes only expressed amusement. Paul apparently was enjoying the difficulties which bristled all over this affair, as well as his partner's perplexities. Receiving no sign of encouragement from Paul, Peter Abramovitch sagely shook his head:

"I can't say I like the business," he said abruptly.

Gabrielle, who was making an almost superhuman effort to keep outwardly calm and to keep the conversation on an even, business-like footing,

could not repress the gasp of horror which rose to her throat. Terror seized her—terror lest this man proved more honest than she thought, refused to bargain over a prisoner of state, and repudiated the business altogether. She did not understand that he was only playing with her, revelling in the mental torture which he was inflicting, and all the while cudgelling his brains how to get the most satisfaction and the greatest amount of lucre out of his unfortunate victim.

"Will you tell me what you mean?" she asked.

"Yes," he said drily, "I will" And leaning his elbows on the desk, his broad shoulders bent, his shaggy head thrust forward peering into Gabrielle's pale, anxious face, he went on slowly: "I mean that I don't trust you. That's all."

"Trust me?" she murmured "In what way?"

"In the way that I am not going to let you and your valuables—whatever they are—slip through my fingers——"

"Impossible!" Gabrielle exclaimed.

"I am going to make it impossible. Mind, I don't say even now that I agree to the whole thing. I must see for myself what there is in that precious sealed case, and I'm going to have a comrade with me who understands precious stones and all that, and who will tell me at a glance what your jewellery is worth"

"That is only fair," Gabrielle murmured

"Of course it's fair," he assented with a harsh laugh, "and let me tell you at once that if my share works out less than three million roubles in gold, there'll be no passports—understand?—

until you make up the amount in some other way."

"I am not afraid," Gabrielle said quietly. "And I can safely promise you that your share will not come to less than three million roubles."

"You are very confident."

"Naturally I am. I know the contents of the case."

"Very well, then," Peter Abramovitch went on resolutely. "That's one thing. The other is that before we go to Kharkoff, you give up your passport and all your identity papers to me. Understand?"

"Not exactly," Gabrielle replied vaguely.

"You give up your passport and your identity papers to me," he reiterated roughly. "Then I know you can't budge out of Russia without I give them back to you, not even with the help of your precious Swedish friend. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Gabrielle said, "I think I do."

"That's all right, then. I see that, after all, you and I are going to get on splendidly together. There's nothing like complete understanding, eh, comrade?" the commissar went on with a chuckle. He had caught an approving glance from Paul's usually inscrutable eyes, and he was warming to his subject, pleased with himself and with the way he was conducting the business on behalf of all his associates both local and foreign. Oh! those foreigners!—Mr. Kilts and partners—what pests they were! Three million roubles was good—divided into half a dozen very unequal shares was not so bad, but when it came to halving those three millions first and then dividing,

that was really unpleasant . . . quite, quite unpleasant! Ah well!—and the people's commissar fell to musing for a few seconds in silence—perhaps with a little diplomacy, a little contriving and thinking things out, one might eventually——

Paul Sergine discreetly shuffled his feet, which brought Peter Abramovitch back from dreams of the future to thoughts of the present He heard comrade Gabrielle Bobrinsky say in a funny, husky voice, that sounded just as meek and humble as any people's commissar could possibly have wished:

"And when can I see my husband, Excellency?"

This certainly brought Peter Abramovitch's thoughts back to the present with a jerk

"Your husband?" he queried blandly.

"Cyril Bobrinsky, my husband," Gabrielle reiterated, trying, oh! trying so pathetically and ever so hard to conciliate this man with every look of appeal and deference. "When can I see him?"

"When we get to Kharkoff, of course," Abramovitch replied, speaking on the impulse of the moment—and not such a foolish impulse either, he thought, and looked across to Paul for approval.

"When we get to Kharkoff?" Gabrielle repeated, dry-eyed, dry-lipped, speaking like an automaton.

"Well, you knew he was in Kharkoff, didn't you?"

"No," she murmured, "I didn't"

"Yes, that's where he is," Peter Abramovitch

went on with a vague gesture of the arm. "That's where all the traitors who fought with Wrangel were transferred last year. Lucky for you, Bobrinsky wasn't sent to Siberia, or—— Lots of them were, you know," he added significantly.

Gabrielle shuddered, closed her eyes for a second or so. Suddenly she felt faint. Sick and faint: for the first time since she had entered this room, which smelt like a grave of the past. Her eyes, which looked abnormally dark above her ashen cheeks and bloodless lips, searched those of Peter Abramovitch with an intensity which would have brought a sense of shame to the soul of any man less brutally callous than this justice of the peace.

"In Kharkoff?" she reiterated mechanically.

"It isn't far," Peter Abramovitch remarked, and resumed his interesting occupation of picking his teeth. "Not much more than a hundred versts. I'll drive you down in my automobile in a couple of hours," he added loftily.

"When?" she asked.

"I'll say to-morrow," he replied "It's too late to-day; we'd find your wonderful bank closed, and the worthy M. de Klingspor gone home to the bosom of his family."

"Yes," she said vaguely. "Perhaps"

"So that's what we'll do," Peter Abramovitch concluded, who was quite satisfied now with himself and with the arrangements he'd made. "We go to-morrow to Kharkoff. We go to the bank, we transact our business together at the bank. First we go to the fortress, and I present an order to the Governor to give up

prisoner Cyril Bobrinsky on demand. I can sign such an order because I am justice of the peace and Bobrinsky is really under my jurisdiction, as he is registered in my district. You understand?"

"Yes, yes," Gabrielle assented, with eager, shining eyes

"Very well, then. As the getting of the prisoner ready, looking through his papers, you understand, and other formalities will take time, you and I go on to the bank in the meanwhile You hand me over the jewels; I give to your Swedish bank manager the two passports, the identity papers, and the order for the prisoner's release Then, if he is satisfied, and I am satisfied, we part the best of friends. I come home, you go fetch your husband and get the afternoon express for anywhere you like. Now is that satisfactory?"

"Quite, quite," Gabrielle murmured in a voice choked with tears—tears of joy, of hope, of happiness, such as she had never dreamed of a little while ago. This venal, dishonest wretch, with the cruel eyes and the dirty hands, suddenly appeared like a god dispensing boons that made one's senses reel with delight. She scarcely heard him, hardly saw him; she was only seeing Cyril walking out of that terrible prison, falling into her arms, turning his back with her for ever on this cruel country. And all the while the commissar was going on in a jovial, lusty tone:

"You see," he was saying, "if you act fairly with me, I'll make it all right for you. No one can do anything for you except me I am justice of the peace and people's commissar of this district, and you and your husband are registered

in my district. All the gold in your Scandinavian bank couldn't help you, if I chose to turn this business down. You understand?"

"Yes, I do," Gabrielle murmured

"So now all you can do is to go back to Jakob Grossman's, eh? I dare say he is making you quite comfortable. The isba is perhaps not quite so luxurious as your château of Ostolga was in the past, but as we agreed just now, times are changed. To-morrow morning at nine o'clock I will come round with the automobile. My friend Aaron Mosenthal will come with us to appraise the jewels, as I mean to be guided entirely by his judgment. I think," Peter Abramovitch said, suddenly struck by a new idea, "that we'd better say that all the jewels in the sealed case shall be mine, provided Aaron Mosenthal says they are worth three millions or more, and I will leave all the securities and other valuables to you. What do you say to that, comrade?" he went on blandly. "Isn't that a generous offer. Why, those securities may be worth ten or even twenty millions. We don't know. But I am willing to let you have the lot, and I take the jewels. Understand?"

Mechanically, like a wooden doll, Gabrielle nodded. She had only heard very vaguely what the man said, and it had only very vaguely reached her comprehension. Jewels? Securities? Money? What did they matter? She had come within sight of the end of her journey, within sight of the moment when she would see Cyril again. What in the world did anything else matter? This callous brute who was bargaining for a fellow-creature's life had struck a note

which still made her heart vibrate with horror and with fear when he warned her that Cyril might have been sent to Siberia or—— Then what did it matter if she gave everything she possessed, so long as she had Cyril, so long as Cyril was safe? Through the buzzing that filled her ears she could hear Peter Abramovitch still descanting on the arrangements for the morrow—the bargaining, the haggling. O God above! haggling for Cyril's life!

"You'd better leave your passports and identity papers with me now," the commissar had said. "They are all visaed and in order, but you'd better leave them with me." And mechanically she took what he wanted out of her bag, and laid them on the desk. But at the last she had one moment's lucidity:

"If M. de Klingspor," she said slowly, "is not absolutely satisfied that the passports and permits for my husband and myself are in order and our safety assured, he will not hand over the jewellery"

Peter Abramovitch threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Of course not," he said lustily. "Wily old Swede!"

Then Gabrielle rose to go.

Paul Sergine followed her out of the room. He was still nominally her courier, in her service, and looking after her comforts. He only exchanged one glance with Peter Abramovitch, but in this one glance the two ruffians had conveyed mutual approval to one another As Gabrielle had been the first to go to the door, no one had noticed

the narrow chink to which Aaron Mosenthal had so patiently glued his ear. By the time Paul had opened the door for his lady, with every sign of obsequiousness, Mosenthal was sitting on a hard, wooden bench at the farther end of the passage, engaged in the perusal of a dirty and ragged piece of newspaper. There was no one else there except the stranger of a while ago, who stepped back discreetly into the shadow of the stairs when the lady and her servant appeared.

The Celestial City *XXV*

As soon as Mosenthal had closed the front door behind those two, the stranger, with another wad of greasy notes held significantly in his hand, reminded him of his desire to speak with the commissar, in spite of contrary orders.

Aaron thought that in all probability Peter Abramovitch would be in excellent humour after his interview with the Bobrinsky, so he made no bones about bearding the great commissar in his luxurious den

"A foreigner," he announced, "wants to see you before noon as he has a train to catch."

"Have I not said——" Peter Abramovitch began, but was unceremoniously interrupted by his usually meek comrade:

"He'll give you two-hundred roubles if you'll see him," Mosenthal broke in curtly.

Peter Abramovitch laughed. He was really in a very pleasant humour.

"How much did he promise you?" he asked.

"Fifty. That's all. I never get more than twenty-five per cent. of what you get, Peter Abramovitch."

"That is because your worth is exactly one-quarter of mine," the commissar retorted sententiously.

After which he condescended to receive the stranger.

There was some little difficulty about the language, the stranger being a Bulgar, with a very slight knowledge of German and hardly any of Russian But he managed to make the commissar understand that he was a peasant-proprietor come to make purchases of grain in South Russia He had been to Budapest, and in the train between Vinnitsa and Kiev he had been robbed of most of his money, and, what was worse, of his passport and that of his wife. Now, would the commissar for a consideration——?

The commissar was always ready to do anything for a consideration It depended, of course, on the amount, and also on one or two other things. If the applicant had been English, or French, or some other kind of bourgeois, then the consideration would have been very high. Perhaps in view of the substantial business pending in Kharkoff, he might even have treated himself to the luxury of refusing to do anything whatever, and leaving the law against foreigners travelling without passports to take its course. It was, by the way, a very unpleasant law, the prisons in this beautiful land of liberty being distinctly uncomfortable. But if the passport-less foreigner

was an Austrian, a German, or a Bulgar, then the commissar would relent; he would become quite amenable, and he would arrange the passport difficulty for a consideration. That was because he had been made to understand that there were certain countries in Europe where the same ideals of universal brotherhood, of liberty, and of equality existed, and of these countries, Bulgaria was certainly one.

He therefore listened with grave condescension to the petition of this Bulgar landowner, and only charged him a thousand roubles for the new passport. Most fortunately this M. Danieff—that was his name—had a small photo of himself in his letter-case; it was perhaps not a speaking likeness, but the commissar decided that in consideration of those thousand roubles it would serve the purpose. When this portion of the business was happily over, the passport duly signed and countersigned and adorned with a number of seals, a slight trouble arose over the question of the wife's passport.

"I ought to see her," the commissar said decisively.

"Unfortunately," M. Danieff replied, "we are not staying in Ostolga. We stayed the night at Konorevo so as to pick up the express there for Kharkoff. And I must catch that express," he went on excitedly," or I shall lose the best chance I ever had of a fine deal in rye."

And as something in the commissar's attitude seemed to suggest obstinacy, M. Danieff went on persuasively: "Look here! another thousand roubles for a passport for my wife."

Peter Abramovitch shook his head.

"It is more difficult," he said. "It will cost you two"

"Well," M. Danieff rejoined with such surprising alacrity that the commissar wished he had said three instead of two, "if you get it through quickly——"

"You have a photograph?"

"No; that's the trouble. I had a few spare ones, in case they were wanted, but they were in the valise that was stolen."

"Then how are we going to manage without a photograph?" mused Peter Abramovitch.

"Surely you can——"

"Impossible You see, our passports now are made out like this," and he picked up the one that Gabrielle Bobrinsky had placed on his desk five minutes ago. It was in the shape of a small booklet, but right on the front page was the photograph of the holder. "You see," he said dolefully, "it could not be disguised. And at the frontier——"

He really felt very vexed. He wanted to oblige this amiable Bulgar, but he didn't want to get into trouble with any of the authorities either at Kharkoff or at the frontier for issuing irregular passports. He didn't want to lose this pleasant job, didn't Peter Abramovitch Stanko—at any rate, not until he was quite sure that the business of the Bobrinsky jewels was all right, more especially as he knew that several of his friends, notably Aaron Mosenthal, and Jakob Grossman, who kept the isba down the main street, would

gladly have stepped into his shoes. It really was very vexing.

"What are we going to do?" he mused again.

But M. Danieff was a man of resource.

"Why couldn't you give me this passport?" he asked.

"How do you mean, this passport?"

"I mean the one you've got in your hand. That would do, wouldn't it?" And as the commissar made no immediate reply, seemed buried in thought, vaguely contemplating the passport, M. Danieff went on cheerfully:

"It's got a photograph It's a woman's passport. Why wouldn't it do?"

Peter Abramovitch had been racking his brain for the last minute or so as to how best he could turn the amiable Bulgar's suggestion to account, but he had not yet arrived at a definite conclusion. There was something to be made out of it, but what? He shook his head gravely.

"But," he argued, "this passport is made in the name of Gabrielle Bobrinsky, born in Scotland, wife of Cyril Bobrinsky, and so on, and it is her photo that's on this top page."

"Well," retorted Danieff with a laugh, "isn't one woman much like another? And I needn't tell the authorities, need I? that the one I am travelling with is my wife or anyone else's."

He went round to the other side of the desk and quite unceremoniously took the passport out of the commissar's hand. For a moment or two he examined it attentively, then he said coolly:

"I believe that my wife has got a hat just like this one. They call them cloches in Paris and

in London; and one woman looks just like another when she's got one on At any rate," he added with a significant wink at the commissar, "it will be near enough, if I make it worth while for the officer at the frontier not to be too particular, eh?"

And as if to clinch the argument, he slipped the passport into the capacious pocket of his travelling-coat, and taking out his letter-case he coolly counted out four thousand roubles, and laid them right under the nose of Peter Abramovitch Stanko. The commissar's hand came down flat upon the notes. There they were! He was not going to let them flit away again. After all, if this amiable Bulgar chose to take the risk of facing the police authorities at Kharkoff and the frontier officers with a false passport, that was none of Peter Abramovitch's business He had not issued the passport. True! he had put his visa on it last evening when the woman Bobrinsky first presented herself at his office, but he could in no way be held responsible as to what happened to the passport afterwards It may have got lost or stolen Anything may have happened to it. And if Danieff and his wife got into trouble in consequence of this passport, why, there again it was none of Peter Abramovitch's business.

In the meanwhile the pleasant Bulgar was coolly lighting a cigar. He offered one also to the commissar·

"Have one?" he asked.

Peter Abramovitch accepted the cigar, which was an excellent one, in the same spirit as he had accepted the notes. It was all part of the day's

work. Then with a laugh, in which his amiable interlocutor failed to detect any irony, he tossed another paper across to him:

"You'd better have the identity papers as well," he said drily. "They are all in the same name."

Danieff took the papers quite coolly and, being apparently a man of careful habits, he put them together with the two passports and slipped an elastic band over the lot.

"Now I'll get back to Konorevo as soon as I can," he said

He seemed to find the buttons of his great-coat very stiff; that, no doubt, was the reason why he failed to notice at first that the commissar had actually condescended to rise and was holding out a very grimy hand towards him by way of farewell By the time he did notice it, he already had his thick, fur-lined gloves on.

"Can't shake hands with gloves on," he said genially, and nodding to the commissar, he turned to go.

"I hope you won't miss your train," Peter Abramovitch called out after him, as he went out through the front door.

The Celestial City XXVI

THE one and only isba in the little township of Ostolga, in the province of Koursk, was kept by Jakob Grossman It boasted of three rooms facing the street, with an enclosed yard at the back

and a shed which was grandiloquently termed a garage. All the three rooms faced the street: the two end ones had tiny windows which were never opened; the centre one, which was the public eating-room and drinking-bar combined, had a door —a window therefore was unnecessary.

The room on the right was partly kitchen and partly sleeping-chamber. Jakob Grossman and his frau and the youngest child slept there at night in a bed; the children slept on benches or on the floor. The room on the left was the ceremonial guest-chamber. It had in it a wooden bedstead piled up to the ceiling with feather pillows and eider-downs, a chest which contained the family linen, four upholstered chairs, and a chest of drawers. The more valuable poultry, which could not be allowed to roam out of doors in the winter, laid their eggs in that room, and hatched out their broods on the feather pillows and on the top of the family linen. Litters of pigs had also first opened their eyes to the world in Jakob Grossman's ceremonial guest-chamber; and once, before the war, during some military manœuvres in the district, the Ataman of Kosaks of the district of Térek had rested one night in Jakob Grossman's isba and slept in the ceremonial guest-chamber It being late summer, there were no hens sitting at the time. The Ataman only stayed the one night.

The isba boasted of a high-sloping roof, which was thatched with hemp. Beneath the roof there was a loft, and this had a small window at one end, which gave on the side of the house at right angles to the street. A narrow spiral staircase

in the rear of the public room gave access to the loft, in which, on this same night, the one guest of the isba—Princess Gabrielle Bobrinsky—had been accommodated with a mattress, a small ewer and basin, a three-legged stool, and a storm-lantern. It was no use indulging people of that sort with luxuries. They had had more than their share in the past, and it was the turn of the workers of the world to lie in feather-beds and to drink champagne. Moreover, there were eight hens sitting in the guest-chamber who could on no account be disturbed.

In the loft there were sacks of barley and of rye, and bunches of maize and of onions were hung up on the rafters to dry. There were also mice and a couple of bats, and other things still more unpleasant. Jakob Grossman had not put them there purposely, but if a female customer comes to the isba and wants a room to herself, and there are eight valuable hens sitting in the guest-chamber, then what is a man to do? Moreover, the customer had seemed quite satisfied She had eaten a little bread and an egg, and drunk some tea, then she had gone up to the loft and Grossman hadn't seen anything of her since

That was as well, because he didn't want anybody knocking around the public room this evening He and several comrades had a great many matters to talk over together.

Five Russian members of an international gang of thieves, murderers, and blackmailers had arranged to meet in the public room of Jakob Grossman's isba. They were the people's commissar and justice of the peace of the district, Peter

Abramovitch Stanko; his deputy commissar, Aaron Mosenthal, Jakob Grossman, the proprietor of the isba; a minor member of the organisation who had once been an actor at the State Theatre at Moscow, and now played any dirty rôle that his brother-criminals assigned to him; and finally there was Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine, half Jew, half Mongol, the man with the high cheek-bones and almond-shaped eyes, the brains of this side of the organisation, as Kilts the Scotsman was the brains of the other.

Jakob Grossman had very unceremoniously closed his doors as early as ten o'clock against every other customer. The precious party had to make sure that there would be no eavesdroppers In the room on the right, which was partly kitchen and partly sleeping-chamber, Grossman's frau was busy putting the children to bed, in the intervals of washing crockery. Her querulous voice could be heard from time to time admonishing one of the children or soothing another to sleep. Jakob Grossman and his comrades took no notice of her, neither did they lower their voices when they spoke. As their conversation was carried on in German, the frau, who was a peasant from the Ukraine, would not understand a word of it.

Overhead in the loft the female customer's restless footsteps had for a time been heard, pacing up and down. But, for a long time now, these had been stilled. The woman was probably tired and had gone to sleep; the mattress was all right to sleep on. Jakob Grossman had taken it, along with some other things, out of the pope's house, when the latter was turned out of the district and

had to run for his life, leaving all his goods behind

Now that everything was quiet in the isba, it was good to talk. Peter Abramovitch, Jakob Grossman, Aaron Mosenthal, and the actor from the State theatre of Moscow sat round the table in the middle of the room, engaged in a game of Tarok. Paul Sergine was lying full-length on the ledge above the earthenware stove—a nice, warm, comfortable place, from whence, with his head leaning on his hand, he could command a good view of the Tarok players, and during the intervals of play, or whilst cards were being dealt, he could proceed with his account of everything that had occurred in connection with the Bobrinsky jewels.

Already he had explained to his comrades that there was a certain Mr. Bill who was one of the heads of the English side of the organisation—the man whom they knew as Mr. Kilts being the other—and that this Mr. Bill happened to have a daughter. Now, for several reasons into which he, Paul, had not been prepared to enter, this daughter had decided to come to Russia with her father and Mr. Kilts.

The point was that this daughter of Mr. Bill was a bosom friend of the woman Bobrinsky, and every man knows that when two women get talking together, why, the devil also has a word to say.

So far things had gone very well, Paul had gone on to explain. He himself being a man of resource, he had always contrived to give Mr. Bill and his party the slip. Of course he knew that they were hot on his heels; Mr. Bill's girl wanted to speak to her friend, and it took some contriv-

ing that the two should not meet. In Vienna, for instance, they had been within a stone's throw from one another—in the same town, he, Paul, with the Bobrinsky woman in one hotel, Bill and his party in another just round the corner. But with the help of Mr. Kilts all had gone well. So far. But now the end of the journey had come. Mr. Kilts very wisely had chosen the longest way to get to Koursk from Vienna. He had brought his little party via Lwow, so as to give Paul the chance of getting the woman Bobrinsky here in Ostolga twenty-four hours sooner, by travelling via Warszawa. So far so good, here they were: he, Paul, and the woman upstairs. But Mr. Kilts and his party would certainly arrive by the afternoon train to-morrow, bar accidents or delays which could not be reckoned on

"The point is," Paul Sergine had concluded with earnest emphasis, allowing his dark, Mongol eyes to rest alternately on each of the four Tarok players—"the point is that the two women must not be allowed to meet. By hook or by crook they must be kept apart. Once they got together, they would start talking, and if the Bobrinsky woman got to know, before the business was concluded, that her husband was dead, not a finger would she move to get at the jewels

"I have had experience of that class of people," Paul went on, whilst for the moment the players, forgetful of their game, gazed attentively up at him. "I have had experience, and I know. Let the Bobrinsky woman know that her husband is dead, and that she has been led by the nose, and you may threaten her with—well! with all sorts

of things, and she won't move a finger. And then again," he added after a slight pause, "she might die or go crazy when she heard"

Jakob Grossman, looking very much like a sienna-tinted dachshund, gravely shook his head from side to side.

"This business does want a lot of delicate handling," he murmured.

His friend Mosenthal had told him what arrangements Peter Abramovitch had made with the Bobŕinsky woman, the worthy Aaron having heard everything through the chink in the door, and Jakob Grossman felt a little anxious. His share in the business, if it was successful, would be a large one, because he held a high position in the organisation of criminals, owing to his being the proprietor of the isba, and consequently seeing and mixing with a lot of strangers. As he had a high stake in the enterprise, he was naturally very anxious that everything should go smoothly. He certainly was very anxious.

"Suppose," he said, "that damned Swede says that he won't give the jewels up, until after the man Bobrinsky has been given up to him. That would make it awkward for you, Peter Abramovitch, wouldn't it?"

"No, it wouldn't," the commissar replied curtly. "You are forgetting, Jakob Grossman, that Ivan Nikolaievitch, who is governor of Kharkoff prison, is a particular friend of mine."

"No," the red-haired Jew retorted, "I am not forgetting that. But you don't mean to say, Peter Abramovitch, that Ivan Nikolaievitch will also

want a share in the business? Holy Moses!" he ejaculated, "what'll there be left for us?"

"Plenty, I hope. But anyway, we can't do without Ivan Nikolaievitch."

"Why not?"

"Because the Swede, as soon as he sees my order to the governor of Kharkoff gaol to give up the prisoner, will send round to the fortress or else go himself, and make enquiries."

"Of course he will," the others assented, almost in unison

"Well, then," the commissar went on, "Ivan Nikolaïevitch will have to assure that person that everything is in order, that the prisoner is there, and will be given up as soon as a few formalities have been gone through He will talk and look official and plausible; but he will want to be paid for that."

"Of course he will," they all assented dolefully.

"Ivan Nikolaïevitch will also have to say that these formalities will take a couple of hours—perhaps three"

"Yes," Jakob Grossman agreed; "but even so——"

"Why yes, even so! Because I, who'll be waiting with the Bobrinsky woman over at the bank, will in the meanwhile get more and more impatient, and finally—after the first half-hour, mind you—I will suddenly say that I am sick and tired of waiting, that if I am not to be trusted at all, then I throw up the business altogether."

"You throw up the business altogether?" exclaimed Aaron Mosenthal at the top of his rasping

voice. "'Holy Moses! then what's to become of us?"

"I shall only *say* that, you fool!" the commissar retorted; "but I shall say it so well and so often—I shall even get into my automobile, I think, as if I was going back home right away—that the Bobrinsky woman will agree to anything. Why, you know she will, Paul Alexandrovitch," he went on, and looked up at the ubiquitous Paul, who had listened to the discussion with a perfectly inscrutable face and expressionless eyes.

"You needn't be afraid," Paul now said sententiously; "the woman will agree to anything, as Peter Abramovitch so rightly says. She is ready to believe anything. When I gave her that first letter, over in Nice, she never doubted for a minute that it was genuine. No, no, you needn't be afraid, any of you. She won't put a spoke in our wheel."

"And Ivan Nikolaievitch can play his part very well," the commissar continued. "He's done the same sort of thing before He will have books and papers there for the Swede to look at. No end of books and papers and entries and signatures. He looks very impressive in his uniform, does Ivan Nikolaievitch, and so proud and honest," he added naively.

"Besides," Paul Sergine concluded drily from his point of vantage, "neither the Swede nor the woman will be suspecting that anything's going to be wrong."

Whereupon the others nodded approval. But Jakob Grossman, having settled that point to his

satisfaction, now embarked upon a fresh subject for discussion

"It is a pity," he sighed, "that we can't do without Ivan Nikolaïevitch."

"Well," the commissar retorted with an oath, "we can't. *And that's all about it.*"

"There are so many of us to share already," Aaron Mosenthal put in dolefully. "One wouldn't mind Ivan Nikolaïevitch really—he belongs to us, as it were; but we begin by sharing fifty-fifty with those foreigners."

The remark was received in melancholy silence. Jakob Grossman was the picture of a dachshund in distress The people's commissar was more like a rough-haired cur, held in leash and not daring to snarl; only Paul Sergine's almond-shaped eyes became more expressionless than before.

"Couldn't we——?" vaguely suggested Aaron Mosenthal.

"No, we couldn't," the commissar snapped curtly.

"We should be kicked out of the European organisation," Paul remarked drily, "and there's very little left to do now in Russia"

"That's true," Jakob Grossman assented with a regretful sigh for the happy times in the early days of the glorious revolution, when there was such a lot—such a lot to do.

"But," suggested one of the others, "supposing now there was an accident, eh?"

And Grossman sagely shook his head.

"There are often accidents," he said. "In trains. Or—or—one never knows," he added vaguely.

Three of them looked for guidance at the other two. Paul Sergine and Peter Abramovitch were obviously the brains of this body of thieves. Conscious that their inventive powers were being appealed to, they exchanged glances; that is to say, the commissar caught a glance from Paul Sergine's eyes, a glance which would have appeared expressionless to anyone else, but which conveyed a subtle meaning to his boon-companion. A meaning that was satisfying, evidently, because the next moment Peter Abramovitch said quite cheerfully:

"Let's have a bottle of that excellent green Chartreuse, comrade Grossman. And then," he added, looking round at the sober faces before him, "we'll talk of something else."

Grossman called to his frau to bring the Chartreuse, and presently she came shuffling into the room, her shawl over her head, the latest baby in her arms, and the bottle of green Chartreuse in her hand Mixed with French brandy in equal parts, it seemed to make an excellent drink, which further had the property of cheering doleful spirits.

"I suppose," Jakob Grossman remarked, after he had drunk and smacked his lips—"I suppose that we shall have the English party here by the afternoon train to-morrow"

"Yes," Peter Abramovitch replied thoughtfully. "And I ought to be back from Kharkoff by then. I wonder, now——"

But what the people's commissar wondered at at this moment was not destined to be known just then. The green Chartreuse having eased the tension, a fresh deal in Tarok was promptly asked

for, and for the next quarter of an hour or so the curt calls of "Contra—Recontra—Pagat Ultimo—Vier Könige," and so on, alone broke the silence that had fallen over the isba. Frau Grossman and her brood had apparently all gone to bed; now and again only would a puling little cry be heard or a sharp "Be quiet, André!" or "Go to sleep, Irma!" from the wearied mother. Overhead, too, all was still. Just before the game had been resumed, Jakob Grossman had crept up the winding stairs on tip-toe and listened for a moment at the door that gave on the loft. When he came down, he reported that everything was still up there. The woman was evidently fast asleep; Jakob could not even hear her breathe.

Soon after midnight the party broke up. Jakob Grossman this time was the winner at Tarok. He was in rare good-humour. All his misgivings about the business on the morrow had vanished with his good luck at cards. He was also pleased because the subject of the foreigners sharing in the matter of the jewels had been dropped so abruptly. It had been dropped in consequence of a knowing glance exchanged between Peter Abramovitch and Paul Sergine, and Jakob Grossman was willing to leave it at that. There were often accidents on trains or in automobiles; people who travelled, naturally took their lives in their hands, as it were—and really the fifty-fifty sharing proposition should never have been agreed to.

Grossman that night went very contentedly to bed.

THE following morning, soon after nine o'clock, the chocolate-coloured automobile which had once belonged to the Bobrinskys, but was now in the natural course of events the property of the people's commissar of the district, drew up outside the isba. Peter Abramovitch, in a magnificent fur coat and round hat of astrakan, jumped down, leaving Aaron Mosenthal in charge of the car. He walked briskly across to the front door of the isba, loudly calling for Jakob Grossman. He was in the best of spirits. Last night, after the party at the isba had broken up, he and Paul Sergine had had a long talk—a nice, long, intimate talk—during which they had settled one or two outstanding matters to their own satisfaction Paul was a man of inventive brain and full of resource. Peter Abramovitch was very pleased with him.

The weather this morning was very cold and raw. These were days when the pale April sun would melt the snow by day, and the night frosts would freeze the puddles in the cart-ruts and turn the mud into hard cakes. At nine o'clock the hard cakes had not yet been turned into slush, and the cart-ruts were still paved with ice; but down from the overhanging, sloping roofs the melted snow had already begun to drip.

It was cold and raw. Peter Abramovitch, as he stood at the door, waiting for Grossman to pull

the bolts, swung his arms and stamped his feet to keep himself warm. A few seconds later Jakob Grossman appeared.

"Come in, Peter Abramovitch," he said genially, "and have a glass of brandy before you start. It will be cold on the way."

It certainly was not cold inside the isba. A fire was roaring in the big stove and Jakob Grossman had hastened to shut the door as soon as his friend had slipped inside. Aaron Mosenthal had been left to keep himself warm against the engine of his car.

"Well," Peter Abramovitch said, smacking his lips after the first drink of that excellent brandy, "have you seen anything of the Bobrinsky woman this morning?"

"No," Jakob replied, "not yet."

"Heard anything of her?"

"No. She's been very quiet."

"We shall have to get under way very soon. It will take us three hours to get to Kharkoff. The roads are devilish bad."

And Peter Abramovitch took another good drink of brandy—it was good French cognac too—then he shouted:

"Hey there! comrade Bobrinska. It's time we got under way."

But though the commissar's voice was loud enough to shake the beams of the isba, there came no response from the loft.

"She surely cannot be asleep!" Peter Abramovitch remarked with a frown

"I'll go and see," Grossman rejoined.

He shuffled up the spiral staircase, and quite

unceremoniously lifted the latch of the wooden door that gave on the loft. He found it a little difficult to push the door open; something seemed to be in the way, and looking down, he saw the mattress, which had evidently been laid on the floor right against the door. Jakob pushed and pushed, and all the while he swore.

"Now then, woman, what devil's tricks have you been at? Pull that mattress away so that I can get in."

When, a second or two later, he was able to squeeze his body through the door into the loft, the first thing he saw was that a whole lot of things had been piled on the top of the mattress, the sacks of barley, the bunches of maize and onions.

"What the devil——?" he muttered.

"Hey!" Peter Abramovitch shouted from below. "What's happening there? Why doesn't the woman come?"

At first Jakob could see nothing. The loft was large and the only window in it small. He called to the woman to come along quickly: the commissar was waiting for her. He also swore at the woman, the darkness, and the cold. The place was like an ice-house. Of course with the window open, what could one expect? Fool of a woman to leave a window open this weather! But where in the devil's name was she?

Gradually Jakob's eyes became accustomed to the gloom—the gloom and the silence. From the public room down below Peter Abramovitch was still yelling at the top of his voice:

"What in h—ll are you doing up there? Tell the woman——"

"The woman's gone!" Jakob shouted in reply.

"Gone? Nonsense! She can't be gone. Where? How? Didn't you see her go?"

Jakob's dachshund face peered down from the top of the stairs.

"She's gone, I tell you," he said. "Only in the clothes she stood in. Her valise is here with the key in the lock, and all her change of clothes there. I haven't had time to turn them over," he added naïvely. "And there's even a handbag here with some money in it."

He came scrambling down the stairs, his sienna-coloured hair bristling with some queer sensation he could not quite define.

Peter Abramovitch poured himself out half a glass of brandy, drank it down, and smacked his lips

"Bah!" he said, as he set the glass back on the table. "She's gone out for a walk, that's all."

"Why," Jakob retorted querulously, "should she start her walk by jumping out of the window, when she could have gone comfortably through here?"

"How do you mean? Jumping through the window? Who jumped through the window?"

"The Bobrinska, I tell you."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know?—how do I know?" Jakob Grossman reiterated, his temper evidently getting ruffled and his nerves visibly on edge. "Haven't I my eyes in my head, Peter Abramovitch? You'll be telling me soon that I didn't see that the window

was open, and the latch of it broken, and that I didn't find this, hanging to a nail just below the window on the outside!"

And Jakob held out a piece of dark material, a rag torn from a dress by a protruding nail. Peter Abramovitch took the bit of material and examined it attentively; then he waved this mute piece of evidence aside impatiently. With great strides he crossed the room and ran helter-skelter up the winding stairs. He wanted to see for himself just what had happened, for Jakob Grossman's story sounded incredible. He strode across the loft and gazed out of the window. There was a wide and very muddy bit of road down below which led to the yard at the back; and beyond the road there was a broken-down chestnut paling which was the boundary between what land belonged to the isba and the yard of the neighbouring cottage. The view from the tiny window revealed no clue to the mystery. There certainly was the nail, to which a few threads of material still hung, but the mud in the road below was frozen so hard that it did not betray the slightest trace of footprints. Peter Abramovitch turned abruptly from the window, to find Jakob Grossman at his elbow with the piece of torn dress material in his hand.

"You think it's a piece of the Bobrinska's dress?" he queried, pointing to the bit of rag.

"What else is it?" Jakob retorted.

"And that she tore her dress climbing out of this window?"

"I know she climbed out of the window."

And Jakob Grossman, suddenly diving into the

dark corner nearest to him, hauled out a heavy length of knotted rope.

"I found," he said, "this rope still hanging outside."

"This rope? She used a rope," the commissar reiterated, frowning, "to climb out of this window?"

"Haven't I said so all along?" Grossman queried irritably. "She found this piece of rope, made some knots in it, tied it round the beam up there, and let herself down that way."

Peter Abramovitch with his nose in the air examining the beam, as if it was going to clear up the mystery, remarked thoughtfully: "Why should she have gone that way instead of comfortably by the door?"

"You may be able to answer your own question, Peter Abramovitch," Grossman rejoined drily. "I can't"

The commissar was silent for a moment, his small dark eyes, with that cruel gleam in them, searched the ugly dachshund-like face, as if to divine the thoughts that were tumbling over one another beneath that sienna-coloured pate. Jakob had sunk down like a limp bundle on the rickety three-legged stool, his pale brown eyes staring at nothing in particular. Stanko, on the other hand, was all the time cudgelling his brains What could be the explanation of this secret flitting, with all the risks of travelling without a permit, when the business of the jewels was going on so well and without a hitch?

"Well," he ejaculated after a moment or two, with a half-sigh of satisfaction, "there's one thing

very certain: she can't go far without a passport. And she has no permit to travel, and no papers of identity."

But this statement had not the desired effect on Jakob Grossman's doleful spirits. He did not wake out of his gloomy meditations, but only murmured in a dispirited kind of way:

"That rascal André Ivanovitch will sell a railway ticket to anyone without a permit, if they give him a few roubles for shutting his mouth."

"Well, then, say the Bobrinska gets as far as Kharkoff," Peter Abramovitch argued "She can't go any farther. The people's commissar at Kharkoff—good comrade Brussin—can't be bought with a few roubles. He is too keen on rounding up all these bourgeois people. And he wants promotion and recognition from Moscow. No, no," he went on, resolutely shaking his head, "you can't get round old Brussin in a hurry. Passports, permits, identity papers, all have got to go through his hands. And he can't grant a permit without the passport and identity papers are in order."

"But," Jakob Grossman broke in querulously, "the Bobrinska's passport and identity papers are in order. She had them when she came here."

"So she had," Peter Abramovitch rejoined with a knowing wink, "but I made her leave all that with me yesterday"

This was meant to be encouraging, but all the sound that Jakob uttered in response to this inspiriting news was a curt "Oh!"

"What do you mean by 'oh!'?" Peter Abramovitch demanded.

"I mean," Jakob replied with a doleful shake of the head, "that where the Bobrinska has gone to, there's no need of passport or of permit."

The commissar frowned:

"You mean——?" he queried significantly.

"I do."

"But——"

"You want to know what I think, Peter Abramovitch? I think the Bobrinska heard us talking last night; and when she heard that her husband was dead, she just went crazy, and has done away with herself"

He rose and shook himself just like a dachshund after it has had a whipping. Now that he had put his fears into words, he felt better, and was able to look his comrade more resolutely in the face. Obviously he cared nothing whether the ex-Princess Bobrinsky had done away with herself or no. Death—other people's deaths—did not worry these makers of social revolutions. What did worry Jakob Grossman was the fear that the business of the jewels could never now come off. But Peter Abramovitch, reading his thoughts, tried to reassure him.

"And if you want to know my opinion, Jakob Grossman," he said, "then I shall tell you that I don't believe the woman has killed herself I believe that she has just tried to give me the slip, and has gone to Kharkoff ahead of me. She must have got round that rascal André Ivanovitch with a few roubles, as you say, and travelled by the five o'clock train this morning. Wait till I catch André Ivanovitch, that's all. Perhaps the Bobrinska only

just wanted to have a talk first with that d——d Swede of hers, so as to see how they can cheat me between them; perhaps she wanted something more than that But anyway," he went on with a vicious snarl, "she won't find that her escape has done her any good. Unless the officer at Kharkoff railway-station has been a perfect fool, the Bobrinska will find that she can't even leave the station without a permit; and if she did manage to slip through this morning, she'll find that she won't be able to leave the town again in a hurry. Where's your telephone, Jakob Grossman?" he queried abruptly.

Just as this conglomeration of hovels called the village of Ostolga boasted of electric light, so did it also possess Western culture in the way of telephone Such anomalies do exist in this part of the world. Jakob Grossman, who lived in one room with his wife, his four children, and his more valuable poultry, had both electric light and telephone installed in his isba.

"Downstairs," he replied, "just underneath the stairs"

Already Peter Abramovitch had crossed the loft with great strides, and was clattering down the winding stairs in search of the precious telephone. Grossman followed him more leisurely. Before he did so, he carefully dragged the Bobrinska's valise into the darkest corner of the loft, behind some sacks of barley; he had already taken the precaution of relieving the hand-bag of its contents What a mercy it was that the commissar had been so deeply engrossed in the mystery of the woman's disappearance that he forgot all about the valise.

From below Stanko's harsh voice could be heard at the telephone:

"Kharkoff," he shouted. "The Commissariat. At once. Eh? What? People's Commissar for Ostolga speaking Ring up Ostolga 14 as soon as I am through. But look sharp, now."

He hung up the receiver, and went to the table to get himself another glass of brandy. Excitement had made him thirsty. Aaron Mosenthal, tired of waiting in the car, came to the door wanting to know what was happening. It was bitterly cold outside, and he was thirsty. But Stanko peremptorily ordered him to go back to the car.

"I am coming directly," he said curtly. And turning to Jakob Grossman, who was slowly coming down the stairs, he added: "No use letting these fools know anything. They are no use and they talk too much."

"But what about Paul?" Jakob suggested. "He'll have to know."

"Of course, Paul," Peter Abramovitch assented "As soon as I have talked with the Commissar at Kharkoff, I'll go back and fetch Paul; he'll have to——"

But at this point he was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone bell.

"Now then, my fine Bobrinska," he murmured as he went back to the telephone and took up the receiver, "we'll just see——

"Hallô! hallô!" he called. "Yes! Commissar Peter Abramovitch Stanko speaking from Ostolga. Eh? What? Commissar Stanko, Ostolga Ostolga. Can't you hear? O.S.T.O L G.A. Yes!

Who is it? What? I can't hear. Commissar Stanko. Stanko. S.T.A.N.K O. Yes, Stanko. Ostolga. I want to speak to Commissar Brussin. Brussin. Oh! it's you, comrade? Good. No; I can't, either. Curse this telephone! Listen! There is a woman who left here to-day without a passport. She is a dangerous reactionary. What? What? A woman. Travelling without passport. Yes A woman. No passport. Alone What? Oh! Bobrinsky. Bo-brin-sky. What? Eh? B.O.B.R. What? Oh, never mind the name, then What? Woman. Alone No passport Detain her. De-tain her until I come. What? Yes, yes! De-tain—woman—alone—without passport—till I come. You will? You heard that? Good! Good! Yes! All right. Good-bye!"

Having yelled into the telephone for over three minutes, Peter Abramovitch felt quite exhausted. He hung up the receiver, and had to be comforted with brandy. Jakob served his friend, muttering half to himself all the while:

"This confounded telephone. More trouble than it's worth, I say. It's always out of order, either because of the snow, or the gale, or the thaw, or something. And if you do get through, you never can hear what they say at the other end, and they never can hear you. So what's the good of it? And the money they charge for the beastly thing——"

"Never mind, Jakob," Peter Abramovitch said reassuringly. "Brussin heard that much, anyway, that I am anxious about a woman who is travelling without a passport. Well, Brussin isn't the man

to deliver a travelling permit without a passport and properly visaed identity papers, so really I needn't have troubled about that telephone. You may rest assured, comrade Grossman," he added, rising and picking up his fur gloves, "that the Bobrinsky woman will have learned by now that it is impossible for her to go anywhere in Russia unless all her papers are in order and visaed by me. Yes, impossible," he reiterated with slow emphasis. "And soon she'll find that in Russia she won't even be able to commit suicide without proper identity papers!"

He laughed, quite pleased with his little joke. And even Jakob Grossman was induced to smile, though there was still a thoughtful look in his pale brown eyes

"Put my automobile up in your garage, Jakob Grossman," Peter Abramovitch concluded, as he made for the door, "and give Aaron Mosenthal enough brandy to make him tipsy. I shan't want him again to-day. I am going round to the station now to find out who left by the train this morning, and then I shall go back to my house to fetch Paul Alexandrovitch. He and I are going to Kharkoff together."

And nodding once more reassuringly to comrade Jakob Grossman, the people's commissar went out of the isba.

THE following morning the English party arrived in Ostolga, having come through from Vienna, via Budapest and Lwow, which was the longest way round. In spite of every effort on the part of Kilts to relieve the monotony as well as the discomfort of the journey, the two days and nights spent in a stuffy train that reeked of filth and manifold odours, the uneatable food served in a restaurant car that rocked like a mediæval torture-cradle, and the impossibility of finding rest between sheets that smelt of sulphur and of dust, had brought Litta's spirits down to their nadir.

Had it not been for thoughts of Gabrielle, she really believed that she must go under, physically or mentally. It was only the hope of seeing Gabrielle again that kept her up, the longing to see the one friend whose affection might prove a solace in the dreary years of vain regrets that were to come. At times Litta fell to wondering if she ever would see Gabrielle again—Gabrielle, for whose sake she had made the supreme sacrifice For the moment she seemed to have become as illusory as the dreams which Litta no longer dared to dream. Looking back on this interminable journey from London, it seemed as if at every turn Gabrielle had just eluded her, whether by coincidence or some reason more sinister, Litta had no longer the energy to conjecture.

In London, in Vienna, in Budapest, it had always

been the same. At the Beausite, in London, Litta had, it seems, just missed her friend by half an hour. In Vienna, after her dream-state in the Prater, when she and Kilts got to the Imperial, they were told by the hall-porter that the Princess Bobrinsky accompanied by her courier had left for Budapest by the morning train. Litta had insisted that Kilts should send a telegram to Paul Sergine, telling him on no account to leave Budapest until they had all met, the matter being of the utmost importance. The trouble was that Kilts did not know at what hotel Paul would be putting up; but Litta had been so insistent that finally a telegram was sent to the four principal hotels in Budapest. With satisfactory results, because at the Hungaria, where Kilts made enquiries, there was a note left for him from Paul in answer to the telegram. Looking very crest-fallen, Kilts brought this letter to Litta. It was written in German, which Litta did not understand, but Kilts translated it as he read along.

Paul said in his letter how surprised he was that Bill and Kilts—he did not mention Litta, as, of course, he did not know that she was of the party—had followed him to Budapest. Did they mistrust him in any way? He then went on to say that, acting on the instructions in the telegram, he had done his utmost to persuade the Princess to break her journey once more, even going so far as to say there were more difficulties with the Hungarian authorities about the Russian passports, but the Princess had frankly told him that she did not believe him, and that if he didn't wish to accompany her straightway, he might remain

behind: she would go on alone. And as Paul thought the best thing to do was to keep in touch with her, he decided to continue the journey in her company. In any case, they would be held up at the frontier before entering Russia, as the Polish Government now detained every traveller for forty-eight hours before allowing them to proceed This would, of course, give Kilts and Bill ample time to come up with them.

It all sounded perfectly simple and straightforward. Kilts explained that the Polish frontier had become a kind of Ellis Island where travellers were held up sometimes for days, while their passports, their visas, and their luggage were examined and enquired into. As a rule, the unfortunate travellers were herded together in places that were little better than sheds, and the discomfort and dirt were quite unspeakable, but he, Kilts, knew a man who had quite a nice house in the village, and he would see to it that not only they themselves but also the Princess were accommodated in this kind friend's house. There they could rest for a day or two, and as, of course, none of them —except perhaps Paul—would be proceeding to Russia, there would be no trouble with the Polish authorities and they could all come back when they liked.

It sounded absolutely ideal. For the moment Litta felt her spirits revive at thought of meeting Gabrielle at last. After she had broken the terrible truth to her friend, she would still be there to comfort her, and then they would embark on the sad, homeward journey together. Gabrielle would be safe, and she, Litta, would be ready to

fulfil her bargain and return home to her father.

Everything indeed seemed all right. It was only Paul Sergine whom Litta vaguely mistrusted. He had played her false in London, pretending that he would stop Gabrielle from making a start the following morning; and although Kilts and her father were both at pains to explain to her that Paul couldn't help himself, the Princess being so set on going, nevertheless Litta still vaguely mistrusted him. But her father wouldn't hear a word against Paul.

"Paul and I are as one," he said to Litta over and over again. "We've been pertikler pals ever since that day—you know—in Yeominster—when you come out He took a tremendous liking to you, and I liked him because he liked you. See? You can just trust Paul like you would me; and you ain't going to mistrust your old father, are yer, kid?"

And Litta, her soft cheek resting against that rough coat of his, which, in the past, used to give her such a sense of security, murmured a gentle, reassuring "No"

Nor did she, in fact, mistrust her father. She felt that if she lost faith in him now, then indeed would the whole of her little world lie shattered at her feet She remembered the queer code of honour: that whatever else you might do, you must not do the dirty on a pal, and as he had always acted straight and dealt fairly with her in the past, so, she believed, would he act straight in this, the greatest crisis of their lives

And so she had started from Budapest on the last lap of the dreary journey. Kilts had ex-

plained that the Polish frontier, where they would perforce have to halt, and where they would most certainly come up with Paul and the Princess Bobrinsky, was distant forty-eight hours' journey from Budapest, and Litta had entered the stuffy, evil-smelling sleeping-compartment, resigned to a further two days of martyrdom.

But already the first twenty-four hours put a terrible damper on her spirits. Once past the great plains of Hungary—where the huge, perfectly tilled fields, with their furrows already rich with a soft green down, gave promise of the sea of golden corn or of stately, plumed maize to come—once past that land of promise, where the cottages, sparsely dotted about the plain, wore that air of cleanliness and well-being peculiar to purely agricultural districts, desolation, poverty, and dirt were writ large on the agglomeration of squalid, hemp-thatched hovels, called either villages or, more grandiloquently, townships, over which the Slav element in Europe holds sway.

The whole landscape, beyond the frowning peaks of the Karpathians, was terribly depressing During the weary length of those two interminable days, Litta sat in the corner of her sleeping-compartment gazing out on the immensities of earth and sky the sky a dull, uniform grey, broken at very rare intervals by the faint gleam of a pale, cheerless sun; the earth a mixture of coarse grass and frozen mud, with here and there a group of tall poplars or melancholy birch, and an occasional field plentifully sprinkled over with weeds.

And Litta stared at the dreary stretch of country, as she had stared at the snow-capped

peaks of the Karpathians, dull-eyed and weary; and anon she stared equally dull-eyed and equally weary on the flat desolation of the Pripet, over which an occasional heron gave the only sign of life, with a dismal call to its far-off mate, and then on the yellow ribbon of the Dnieper, whose blond and turgid waters lazily lapped its low-lying banks still covered with winter snow.

Litta gazed and stared, not knowing where she was She couldn't read, because of the violent rocking of the badly-coupled carriage over the ill-kept permanent way. She couldn't sleep, because of the noise and the dirt and the perpetual halts at tiny stations, where officials in shabby uniforms blew tin trumpets in a futile and desultory manner. The landscape had ceased to have any meaning for her. She had no idea what part of which country she was traversing. She didn't understand a word of the language. The outlandish names on the various railway-stations conveyed no meaning to her, the aspect of the larger towns still less Lwow, Pinsk, Gomel, Briansk. What possible meaning could they possibly have for an English girl who had learned geography before the Treaty of Trianon and Versailles had re-drafted the map of Europe? After a while she noticed that the names of the stations were printed in characters that were different from the Latin—they were characters which she in her ignorance had always believed to be Russian; but Kilts explained to her that they were Polish, and that they were still in Poland, of course In forty-eight hours from the time they left Budapest they would be on the frontier, and all that Litta

had to guide her was the flight—the very slow flight—of time.

In the afternoon of the second day they reached what certainly looked like a frontier station. Everyone had to get out of the train. The weather was horrible. A thin drizzle, half snow, half rain, seemed to penetrate to one's very bones. There seemed to be endless formalities about customs and passports. Litta, of course, didn't understand a word of what anybody said, and, hanging to her father's arm, she went wherever she was led. There were not many passengers: the men mostly wore high boots, which were a good protection against the half-frozen snow, and Litta wished her father had a pair; she was afraid he would get his feet wet and catch cold. There were only about half a dozen women who got out of the sleeping-cars or first-class carriages, and who wore hats and fur coats; all the others had shawls over their heads and seemed loaded with innumerable bundles. All the passengers spoke various languages, which Litta did not understand, although she thought, by the intonation, that one or two spoke German

When they first got out, Kilts had explained that this was the frontier town between Hungary and Poland, and that fortunately he spoke a few words of Polish and could manage everything without either Bill or Litta having to worry about anything Kilts really was wonderful! He took charge of all the passports and the keys of the boxes, and deposited Litta and her father in a waiting-room, while he went to see after everything. Bill and Litta sat down on a wooden

bench, after they had taken the precaution of drawing it well away from the wall. On the floor a dozen or so children were crawling and playing in the company of ants, beetles, and other objectionable things. On the wooden benches ranged round the wall, patient, weary-looking women sat wrapped in shawls hugging bundles or babies. It was insufferably hot in the room, except when somebody came in or out through the door that gave on the station platform, when an icy-cold draught would suddenly pierce through to the marrow.

Litta was so dog-tired, and the feeling of sitting still and not being ceaselessly rocked in a kind of torture-cradle was so comforting, that presently her head fell against her father's shoulder and she went fast asleep. Once or twice she woke, either because someone had blown a tin trumpet, or because one of the children started to cry, or one of the passengers had slammed the door to with a bang; on one occasion she half opened her eyes and saw Kilts standing there, talking to her father. But as she was not required to move, she went to sleep again

When she finally woke up, wide-eyed and startled, Kilts was again there, and he said that everything was in order. Litta thought that she must been asleep a long time, because the dull afternoon had changed to evening, and a half-burnt-out electric lamp overhead was now turned on and shed its dim light over the squalid scene. The passengers were all crowding in the doorway, hustling one another to get into the train. It was very cold. Kilts told them regretfully

that there would be no sleeping-car available for them on this train, and he didn't think they would care to wait for the express the following morning. Litta was quite sure that she would not, and Kilts then said that he had arranged with the chef de train that they should have a first-class compartment to themselves, and there was a coupé next door, where Litta could lie down and be sure of remaining undisturbed.

And throughout that long, endless night and dismal dawn and morning Litta fought with memory, which, nerve-racking and insistent, perpetually conjured through the gloom visions of the exquisite dream, dreamt æons ago in the little classical arbour in the Prater at Vienna, when the scent of spring was all around, the chestnuts burst their fat gummy buds, and the air vibrated with awakening bird-life and pæans of praise from hundreds of feathered throats. The dream, the drugged sleep; with her man kneeling at her feet, her hand gently stroking the smooth brown hair Her man! the mate, the friend, for whom she now longed with the most terrible heart-ache she had ever endured; the mate whose glance, whose softly whispered words, had thrilled her on those exquisite evenings in Santa Rosa, when the freesia was in bloom and the nightingale sang in the old walnut tree

Now she was left alone. She herself had turned away from him, in the hour when he had laid his broken pride at her feet, in the hour when she had suddenly ceased to wonder whether he knew the story of her past or whether he did not; when she no longer feared him, because she knew

at last that he loved her, whatever that past might have been. She had turned away from him in that supreme hour, when love, held in leash by pride for so long, had at last burst its bonds and lay humble and appealing at her feet.

"Litta! my little Litta! I will teach you how good it is to love, and when the nightingale sings again in the old walnut tree, I will teach you how good it is to kiss!"

And Litta had turned away, because she was fettered by bonds of honour that tied her to the old life in which he had no part And because of those bonds she was going back to the old life, and between Gabrielle's affection and her father's love she would try to forget. It was for Gabrielle that she had made the great, the supreme sacrifice; for her sake that she had turned away from her mate and gone back to her father.

Gabrielle and her father! Would she find in those two affections the comfort for which she craved? Would they fill that terrible void which, like the dreary expanse of the Pripet marshes, echoed to no sound of life save to the despairing cry to a far-off mate.

XXIX

Litta's first thought when the train presently drew up at what looked like a very small station, and Kilts came into her compartment and told her that at last they had come to their journey's

end, had been for Gabrielle, her first question: when would she see Gabrielle?

It seems that the place they had come to was a kind of suburb of the big frontier town where all the other passengers had been made to alight. Litta must have been very fast asleep when they had stopped at that town, or she would have heard something of the noise and bustle that had gone on at that station. So Kilts said, and added that he hoped she felt a little rested after her sleep. Litta, on alighting, could not help remarking that there seemed to be plenty more passengers left in the train, but really everything seemed of so little importance, now that she was so near to seeing Gabrielle, that she did not give the whole matter another thought. She was out of the train in an instant, happy to be in the open air, although it was cold and damp, with rivers of mud and half-melted snow all over the permanent way and no platform to the station.

She understood that she, her father, and Kilts were to be the guests of one of Kilts's friends, who was a very high Russian official, and that it was through his influence that the English party had been allowed to proceed as far as the suburban station, instead of being cooped up in impossible huts in the town, far worse, Kilts declared, than Ellis Island in the States.

This wonderful friend of Kilts's had sent his car to meet the party, and Litta, half dazed both with fatigue and excitement, found herself presently bundled into this, and whisked through some more rivers of slush and melted snow to quite a pleasant-looking house, on the threshold

of which stood the host, whom Kilts introduced to her as Peter Abramovitch Stanko. He was exceedingly amiable, too exuberantly so, Litta thought. Of course she could not understand a word he said, for he spoke partly in German and partly in Russian, but she certainly didn't like him. At first sight she put him down as coarse, her father and Kilts, even after the horrible journey, looked clean and refined beside him. His mouth looked sensual and cruel, and his eyes were shifty.

As he seemed not to understand a word of French or English or Italian, all of which Litta tried on him, in order to ask about Gabrielle, Kilts was obliged to come to the rescue and do some interpreting The commissar—for that, it seems, was his rank—nodded his head most vigorously and emphatically when Kilts made him understand that what the English lady wanted to know was whether Princess Bobrinsky, travelling with her courier, would be obliged to halt at the frontier town. The commissar went on to explain to Kilts in voluble Russian that the Princess was probably there now, if she had started twenty-four hours earlier than the English party. He even went so far as to offer to send his car into the town right away, with orders to find the Princess Bobrinsky and bring her back as soon as possible. Of course there would be a few formalities: the English lady must understand, and be patient Officials in all frontier towns were apt to get red-tapy for want of something better to do, and it might be a couple of hours,

or even three, before Princess Bobrinsky could possibly arrive here.

After that this ugly commissar might have looked like the Prince of Darkness himself, Litta would still have regarded him as a heavenly messenger.

In the meanwhile he expressed the hope that the English lady would take a little rest and look upon his poor house as her own. His housekeeper would show her to her room and bring her a small collation, and then perhaps the English lady would try to get a little sleep. Before the afternoon was half over, the commissar guaranteed that the automobile would be back with the Princess Bobrinsky.

This conversation took place in a long, narrow, overheated hall, at the farther end of which was the staircase leading to the floor above. The housekeeper—an obese, slatternly woman who answered to the name of Natalia—summoned by the commissar, waited for Litta at the foot of the stairs and then conducted her upstairs to a room which at first sight appeared crammed full of furniture of every sort and kind, both suitable and unsuitable; fortunately there was a very nice looking bed in the corner on which there were nice soft pillows and, oh! the joy of it! fine, clean sheets.

But even before she glanced at the bed, Litta had spied a door which, half open, revealed the possibility of its giving on a bath-room. The joy of it! A bath! She peeped in, but, alas! the disappointment was great. The room certainly had a bath in it. At one time it must have been

in use. Now it was covered with grime, the enamel chipped, rusty iron showing in many places, and it was filled with every conceivable kind of lumber, too miscellaneous to take in at a glance. Almost in tears Litta turned to the woman, who stood by solid as a rock, her hands clasped on her enormous body, obviously not even beginning to understand what was upsetting this foreign woman to the verge of tears Fortunately the men were still down in the hall. Litta sent a despairing call to Kilts. He came running up the stairs and once more had to act as interpreter. With his help Litta was made to understand that the bathroom had been in disuse for years, ever since the water-pipes had burst one winter owing to the frost. So there was nothing left but to ask for as much hot water as the house could muster, and unlimited cold water. The woman then waddled off, muttering and shrugging her shoulders at the eccentricities of these foreigners, who were all capitalists and bourgeois.

And presently Litta, after wrestling first with insufficient hot water and inadequate crockery, and then with quite a good meal of cold meat, brown bread, and a half-bottle of excellent champagne, tried to put aside all her troubles She was young and very much alive. Only very, very tired. So, after her meal, she lay down on the bed and went to sleep.

At three o'clock, when Litta woke up refreshed, excited, and almost happy, her father came to her with the story that the Princess Bobrinsky and Paul had not yet arrived.

"It don't mean nothing, kid," he said reassuringly. "The people here say that there are two ways of getting to this infernal place from Budapest, and that we took the shorter way. Well, I suppose Paul was not so sharp as Kilts, and he took the Princess the longest way round."

Litta had listened, dry-eyed and silent, to what her father said For the first time a sharp stab of suspicion had shot through her heart. It was impossible—impossible—that this series of misunderstandings, of just missing the other two travellers at every turn, should be the result of coincidence This meant that her father was lying to her. Had been lying all along. They had brought her here, because she had insisted, but they had meant to lie to her all along.

Father went on talking for a while, but she hardly listened, just pretended to acquiesce in everything, to believe everything, anything, in fact, so as to be rid of him quickly and be left alone, to think He expressed great sorrow at this fresh disappointment for her and went away presently looking—she thought—rather crestfallen and shame-faced

Of course he was lying And she had been a

fool to be taken in by all those lies. She was not going to be allowed to see Gabrielle until after the business of the jewels had been settled. That much was clear. Would she be allowed to see her afterwards? Litta had not tackled her father immediately about all those lies which he and Kilts had told her; she wanted time to think. But what would be the use of tackling either of the men? They would deny everything. Go on swearing and lying. And in a couple of days they would all be in Russia, and God alone knew if she ever would see Gabrielle. This much Litta had not begun to doubt. She did believe that they were still outside Russia and that Gabrielle was also somewhere in this frontier town, waiting for permission to enter that awful country from which she would probably never be allowed to return.

Now, if only it were possible to go over to that town, to enlist the services of a friend who would help her to get there. Once she was there, she was quite sure that she would find Gabrielle. In frontier towns officials always spoke several languages, and as this was Poland, Litta felt sure that in the town she would find somebody who could speak French. She had plenty of money with her, and in this part of the world everything, it seems, could be accomplished with money. The question was, how to get to the town This place where they were had seemed to her, as they drove through that river of slush, to be little better than a village. Was it likely that in a village in Poland, even near the frontier, there would be people who spoke either English or French? Litta thought not. Alone with no

one to consult, no one in whom to confide, and not knowing a word of the language of these parts—that was her position, and the problem of how to act in the interests of her friend was enough to daunt any spirit less buoyant than hers But she was quite sure that the solution did lie somewhere, if only she could hit on it. She sat on the edge of the bed and thought and thought. Somehow she no longer felt either dejected or tired. Up to now she had felt alternately desperately anxious and desperately disappointed, but to herself she had seemed passive, the victim of circumstances she could not control. But now it was different. It was going to be a battle of wills. Her father's backed by his friends, and hers backed by her affection for Gabrielle.

And she was determined to win. Though she was all alone, to scheme, to think, and to contrive, she was determined to win. Her whole existence was at stake, as well as Gabrielle's life. For she had burnt her boats. She had told her father before she started from London that if she went with him she would be burning her boats. And she had done it—finally, irrevocably—in the little arbour in Vienna There was nothing ahead of her now Nothing. If her father finally played her false, and Gabrielle was lured to Russia, never to return, then there would be nothing left for her but annihilation. The end of everything. She had felt something like that in Vienna, when she went away with Kilts from the little classical arbour in the Prater; but even on that awful day she had felt some mental sustenance in the thought of

Gabrielle She had burned her boats, of course, when she turned a deaf ear to Phil, but there had been the sacrifice made for the sake of Gabrielle. But if her father played her false, then there would be absolutely nothing.

And Litta knew what the men must have felt like in the early dawn in Belgium or in France, when the order came to go over the top.

She bathed her eyes and face, which felt hot after all this thinking. She looked at her watch. It was four o'clock. Then she gave a glance through the window. Beneath a drabby grey sky, the outlook was dismal in the extreme. All day there had been a thaw and a kind of yellow slush had settled over everything. In front of the window great lumps of melted snow were coming down from the sloping roof. The house appeared isolated from the rest of the village, as no others were in sight. A little to the right the white-washed tower of a church peeped out above a group of gaunt acacias and evergreen oaks. And down below there was the remnant of what had once been a formal garden with small mop-head acacias looking forlorn, grouped in a circle, round a broken earthenware statue, and interspersed with dead or dying standard rose trees, each surmounted with a coloured glass ball, their tall stems smothered in weeds.

Litta was on the point of turning away from the window when she saw her father and Kilts and the commissar come out of the house, walk away through the desolate bit of garden, then turn away to the right, where they were soon lost to view.

have to start lying to all these confounded Russians. Lies. Lies. More lies. Not that he, Bill, had any objection to lying; but there were so many lies on this journey he was getting all muzzy over them. Presently he wouldn't know who knew what, and who'd been told which, and then there would be the devil to pay.

However, Peter Abramovitch took everything in, quite good-humouredly. The only thing was that, of course, he never would understand about the kid, and what the kid meant to Bill. He'd never cared for anyone in all his life and he would never understand. He only thought that Bill had been weak and soft in allowing his daughter to have her way and bringing her along with him.

"The damnedest rubbish I ever heard," the commissar had declared with a laugh, showing his teeth, which were large and yellow. "Two sane men like you, being led by the nose by a girl——"

But Bill didn't like either what he said or the tone in which he said it

"Cut that!" he broke in curtly.

"Oh! we won't quarrel about it," Peter Abramovitch went on with a shrug. "But what you wanted to bring a girl along here for, when there's business to do, I can't think."

"Then my advice to you is, don't try," Bill retorted, still growling and muttering "But don't you go and say anything I don't like about the kid, or there'll be trouble. That's all."

A gleam shot suddenly through the commissar's small dark eyes, which might have caused the other two men to meditate if they had happened to have seen it. But the gleam was only momentary. The

very next second Peter Abramovitch threw back his head and laughed. "Oh! these English people!" he exclaimed—"always must have an ikon like our peasants over here, something to bow and scrape to. Then they just stand up before it and sing 'God save the King' or 'Abide with me,' and they are happy. But just a girl—Gott im Himmel!"

Then seeing that Kilts looked sullen and Bill ready to snarl, he left off laughing and slapped both the men amicably on the shoulder. "No offence, eh, comrades?" he added. He always found that this token of condescension on the part of so important a personage as he was had the effect of soothing the ruffled temper of any of his pals. but in this case neither the Englishman nor the Scotchman appeared impressed with the honour done to them

"Hadn't you better tell us," Bill remarked drily, "how the business with the Bobrinsky woman is progressing? She arrived all right, I suppose?"

"No," the commissar replied drily, "she did not."

"What?" The exclamation was simultaneous Kilts let fall his knife and fork on to his plate with a clatter, and the glass of champagne which Bill was twirling between his fingers snapped with a loud click at the stem.

"You are joking, friend Stanko," he said slowly.

"Not a bit of it," the commissar replied. "I tell you the woman has not arrived."

"Nor Paul?" Kilts queried.

"Nor Paul, of course."

"But why in the devil's name?" Bill queried.

Peter Abramovitch shrugged his shoulders. "I hoped," he said, "that you would be able to tell me."

"How should we know?"

"You met Paul on the way, didn't you?"

"Yes. In Vienna."

"Well, what did you arrange?"

"That he should take the express to Warszawa, and then on to Koursk, and that we should go via Lwow and arrive here twenty-four hours later."

Peter Abramovitch shrugged: "Always because of the girl, I suppose?"

"Never mind why," Bill retorted with an oath. "That was what was arranged We thought that you'd have all the business settled and done with by the time we arrived"

"Have they been detained at the frontier?" Kilts asked

"Impossible," the commissar asserted. "Paul knows all the officials on both sides of the frontier, and so do I Everything was arranged. They were to go straight through without any delay."

"Has there been a breakdown on the line?" Kilts went on to suggest

"There may be. I didn't really trouble much yesterday, because I thought you had made all arrangements. Now I'll just telegraph to one or two places on the way. We'll soon find out what has happened."

Bill and Kilts were silent after that. To a facility for telling lies there is the inevitable corollary of suspicion. The other fellow might also be telling lies. Not that Bill and Kilts were afraid that Stanko would try to do them out of their share

in the jewel business. Though the contemplated deal was a big one, there might be bigger ones still pending in the near future, and if these Russians played a dirty game now, they would be ignominiously shut out of any further participation in the business of the great international organisation of thieves and blackmailers. No, no, it wouldn't pay them to do the dirty on their English pals. At least, so thought Kilts, who was a Scotchman, and therefore prudent, whilst Bill had that much primitive English instinct in him that he would just have liked to have seen the foreigner that dared to stand up to him.

And so both Kilts and Bill remained surly and silent, whilst Peter Abramovitch went on talking a great deal He was making light of the affair. Small railway accidents, he declared, were of frequent occurrence in Russia. The permanent way, alas! was in such a shocking condition. Nothing serious ever occurred, but it meant delay for passengers, often of a day or two, until the track was sufficiently repaired to enable the train to proceed.

He talked so much and so jovially, he filled the glasses so frequently and with such excellent champagne, that gradually Kilts, for one, seemed to regain his spirits and conversation took a more general turn Bill, however, seemed disinclined to unbend. He had been rather morose throughout the latter part of the journey, ever since they had left Vienna in fact, and Kilts had had some trouble once or twice to keep his own temper with him. At times Bill would snarl just like an angry dog, and would almost bite his pal's head off. Kilts did not want to have even the suspicion of a quarrel

with any of these Russians. The business of the jewels would be difficult enough in all conscience, even if everything went smoothly. If there was going to be any quarrelling, then Heaven knows what mightn't happen. And there was Bill looking for all the world like a bear with a sore head.

Fortunately he drank a good deal of champagne, and presently, after a cup of excellent coffee and one or two glasses of good old French brandy, he cheered up a little, and the meal was concluded without any disagreeable incident. When later on the commissar suggested a walk as far as the isba, to see Jakob Grossman and the other comrades, Bill consented with alacrity.

XXXII

HAVING watched the three men disappear down the road, Litta put on her hat, took her fur coat on her arm, and went downstairs She was going to do something What? she didn't know; but she was on her own feet now, no longer shaken and rocked about in a train; she was on firm ground, and out in the village, or town, or whatever it was, there were people, living, breathing, human creatures, and Litta was going to find one of them, who would be able to help her.

The long, narrow hall was very dim It only derived its light from the glazed upper part of the front door which was at the farther end of it. A short flight of wooden steps led down from

the front door into the garden, and a wooden balcony ran all round the house at the level of the ground-floor windows.

The whole house was extraordinarily still Litta, knowing that the three men had gone out, wondered if the obese and melancholy housekeeper was anywhere about. To right and left of the hall there was a door. The one on the right was ajar. Impelled by curiosity, Litta put her coat down for a moment and went to have a peep. She pushed the door a little farther open and found herself in what was evidently a dining-room The table in the centre was littered with the fragments of a repast: there were empty bottles, half-empty glasses, remnants of cigars The room reeked of tobacco smoke and fumes of wine and food. Litta, with her natural English instinct for wholesome air, went over at once to the window, with a view to opening it. While she fumbled with the catch she heard a voice calling: "Natalia, is that you?" and a moment or two later a door on her right, which evidently gave on an inner room, was flung open and a man appeared under the lintel.

"Natalia!" he shouted impatiently, "why the devil——?"

But the words died in his throat. Litta, quick as lightning, had turned at the sound of the voice and given one gasp of surprise:

"Paul Sergine!"

He paused, and for a second or two the two of them stood quite still, looking at one another.

Litta's first thought after that one flash of surprise was nothing but joy If Paul was here, so was Gabrielle. They must have arrived while

she sat upstairs brooding, half-breaking her heart with anxiety. But now father and Kilts and the commissar had gone to meet Gabrielle, and in a few minutes Litta would have her beloved friend in her arms. Her suspicions were unfounded. Everything was going to be all right. And she gave another little gasp of pleasure

"When did you arrive?" she asked eagerly.

Before he answered, Paul entered farther into the room and closed the door behind him. Then he went across to the door that gave on the hall and closed that also. He was giving himself a few more seconds in which to think He had been dreaming, half asleep on his bed after heavy drinking, and had forgotten for the moment about the kid Chance, acting like a mischievous imp, had sent her prying into this room, and the plan which he and Peter Abramovitch had formulated of throwing dust in the eyes of their English associates, in order to gain time, was thus frustrated at the outset, and while the commissar was busy explaining to Bill and Kilts that the Bobrinsky woman and Paul Sergine had not yet arrived in Ostolga, he, Paul, found himself suddenly brought face to face with the kid

But Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine was not the man to allow such vagaries of chance to interfere with his plans The kid must have another handful of dust thrown in her eyes, or else be made to hold her tongue.

And swaggering up to Litta, hands in pockets, his narrow Mongol eyes contemplating the pretty picture Litta presented in her neat tailor-made and smart little hat, he retorted coolly:

"What's that to you, kid, when I arrived?"

"Nothing at all," she replied "All I want to know is where is the Princess Bobrinsky?"

Paul looked her up and down, with that appraising look with which he had regarded her the very first time he had set eyes on her, in the basement of the house in Pierson Street at Yeominster, when he had been told of the kid's prowess and all she had done in the interests of the gang. By gosh! she was pretty! The whiteness of her skin! and then those ruddy curls, in colour like a chestnut, which peeped out from under the brim of that jaunty little hat. Paul Sergine was a man who had found the women of his class easy to deal with; and it struck him that here was an exceedingly pleasant way ready to his hand for dealing with this one Time, diplomacy, and tact were all he needed. His first move was to push the soiled cloth and empty glasses and plates away from one corner of the table, and to sit on it, with one foot resting on the ground, the other dangling, one hand in the pocket of his loose tweed coat, and the other free for gesticulation The attitude, he felt, was easy and effective; that the kid immediately stepped back so as to put another yard between herself and him did not disturb him in the least

"Where is the Princess Bobrinsky?" Litta reiterated peremptorily.

"Funny you should be asking me that question, kid," Paul Sergine rejoined leisurely.

"Why?"

"Because I can't answer it—that's all."

"How do you mean you can't answer it?"

" Just what I say. I can't tell you where the Princess Bobrinsky is."

" Why not?"

Paul Sergine waited for the space of one second before he replied. With the point of his finger he scratched his unshaven chin

" Say I don't know," he said at last.

" That's a lie," Litta retorted.

" Say it is," he admitted coolly.

" Who ordered you not to tell me?"

" Suppose I was to tell you it was your father, would you believe me?"

" No," Litta replied boldly. She had hesitated—for one instant only, it is true—but she *had* hesitated; and Paul rejoined with an enigmatic smile:

" D'you think he couldn't tell a lie?"

" I know that you can," she retorted

" Isn't that funny, now? Queer creatures, you women! Here's old Bill telling you lies by the ton, and you'd believe him against me, who haven't told you one."

" Tell me where Princess Bobrinsky is," Litta rejoined, " and I'll forgive you any lie you ever told me"

" But I'm telling you, kid, that I can't S'elp me. I can't unless—— Ask your father," he went on abruptly. " He knows."

" If he knew he'd have told me——"

" Oh!" Paul sneered, " would he?"

" He'd have told me," she insisted, trying with all her might, trying so pathetically to remain calm, to reason with the man, to keep a tight hold on herself until she made him tell her what had become of Gabrielle.

"Just as he told you, didn't he?" Paul retorted, still with that sneer on his impassive Mongol face, "that he'd brought you eight hundred miles into Russia—what?"

"What do you mean?"

"I always mean what I say, kid. You'll find that out when you know me better."

"Well?"

"Well, I'm telling you that your father and Kilts have brought you eight hundred miles into Russia; and have been kidding you all the time that you were still on the frontier. That's all. Now who's telling lies?"

Litta had not moved one muscle while the meaning of what Paul was saying penetrated to her inner consciousness. Her father! Somehow it never struck her to doubt the truth of what Paul had just told her. Her father had been lying to her. Lying. And to *her*. Liars! Liars! They were all liars, all these men who seemed to look upon her as one of themselves. One of their tools to use at will for their abominable purposes. To break and cast aside should they no longer need her. Every nerve in her body tingled while he spoke. Tingled with dull resentment and horror and a kind of hideous fear. She was alone, all alone amongst them This ugly Paul with the Chinese face and the unshaven chin, Kilts the red-haired giant, their Russian associate with the cruel, shifty eyes—and now, her father. She thought of them all, one by one. Their faces grinned at her through a thick veil which had descended over her and was making her eyes smart with the effort to see through it. She could not see through it. Its

heavy folds held her down, and when she tried to struggle through, it was her father who enveloped her more closely, smothering her in the horrible veil which suddenly became a thick smelling vapour.

"Hold on, kid!"

The sound brought her back to herself with a jerk. She was not going to show weakness Not now. Before this wretch, whose ugly, Chinese face had grinned at her all along through that horrible veil. She was not going to faint. Great God! no!—faint, and perhaps fall into his arms? Be carried in his arms, when she was unconscious? Instinct fortunately rebelled at the thought and brought her back to reality.

"I'm all right," she said firmly. "Only the smell in this room—— Open the window, please"

Paul laughed and gave a shrug. But he did jump down from the table, saunter up to the window and open it. The cold, raw air struck Litta full in the face; she drew it in greedily, with lips parted, filling her lungs. At once she felt better. A second or two later she heard Paul shouting a sudden "Hallo!" and immediately afterwards two or three words which she did not understand.

A man's voice replied in broken French:

"I am seeking the commissar. On passport business I am Italian. I speak not one word of Russian"

"The commissar will see you to-morrow morning," Paul said, also speaking Italian, and was about to shut the window when the man outside gave a pathetic wail.

"Alas! sir, what shall I do till to-morrow morning? No one will give me a night's lodging because I have no papers."

"That's no affair of mine," Paul retorted brusquely. "The commissar is not here now, and his office hours are from nine to twelve in the morning."

At which the unfortunate Italian set up such a howl of distress as to waken the echoes of this desolate spot.

"What shall I do?" he shouted at the top of a raucous voice. "I've come all the way from Italy—Santa Rosa—a long, long way——!"

With a muttered oath Paul made another attempt to close the window, but this time it was Litta that prevented him. The words "Santa Rosa" had brought her flying to the spot from whence she could catch a glimpse of the man who had come from that hallowed spot. But all she saw was the back of a stooping figure shambling across the forlorn garden, and a pair of arms waving about with gestures of acute distress.

"Call him back, Paul," she demanded. "I want to speak to him."

"Call him back? Not me," Paul retorted and summarily closed the window. "I've other things to attend to than to run after dirty Italians."

But Litta was not listening to him now. When he closed the window she ran to the door. Out, she must get out, and speak to that man who came from Santa Rosa. She fumbled with the door-latch. It would not yield She fumbled again, and pulled and tore at the door. It shook, but did not yield. Then she heard Paul give a low, dry

chuckle. She turned on him, her cheeks crimson with indignation.

"Open the door," she commanded.

He had resumed his perch on the corner of the table, his legs dangling, a curious smile on his yellow Mongol face.

"Not me," he retorted coolly. He took a cigarette from his case, struck a match and lighted the cigarette. He puffed away at it, his head cocked on one side, his narrowed eyes appraising the alluring picture of the kid, prettier than ever now with her flaming cheeks and eyes as blue as the midnight sky.

"Open the door," she reiterated peremptorily. "How dared you lock it?"

"I only locked it so we should not be interrupted by that fool Natalia But now I am glad I did it, so you can't run away."

And Litta, quivering with indignation and not at all with fear, reiterated for the third time, in a voice which she had succeeded in rendering quite steady:

"Open that door!"

"I thought you wanted to know about your friend the Princess," Paul said with a sneer.

"So I do. But you are going to open that door first"

"Not me! That door stays locked until I've done talking with you"

"There's nothing I'd listen to from you, behind a locked door."

Paul took a long pull at his cigarette, then exhaled a cloud of smoke which twirled and curled all about his head until only the dark almond-shaped

eyes shone clear and hard through the cloudy rings.

"Very well," he said. And with great deliberation he extinguished his cigarette, then he jumped down from the table, and, with hands in pockets, swaggered up to Litta. "If there's nothing you will listen to from me, then you'll never know—never, understand?—what has become of Princess Bobrinsky"

For a second longer Litta hesitated. She was not in the least afraid, she was only distrustful, vaguely guessing that some ignoble thoughts had taken root behind the Russian's smooth parchment-like brow. To a certain extent she felt that she was in his power, sufficiently helpless to be at a disadvantage in wordy warfare. Litta had been brought up in a rough school; the men with whom she had associated in her early youth were not the sort that could be cowed or subdued by a woman's look or a woman's command. To all these gaol-birds a woman was a thing, a tool to be of use to them in their nefarious deeds, a chattel in their domestic life to minister to their pleasure or comfort. But never anything more. To this Russian revolutionary the highest ideal of womanhood was that infamous wretch Sonia Tortenska, who at the age of seventeen had with her own hands executed thirty-six members of the despised bourgeois class All these thoughts and recollections did not, of course, cross Litta's mind while she stood for a second or two as it were on the threshold of an unknown chamber, into which this man, half European by blood and half Asiatic by descent, was bidding her enter. She was not afraid, but she was alert, keying up her nerves so

to have fallen into the sentimental trap so skilfully laid for her by her father. She had been unhappy, rebellious, resentful, and in a wild desire to shut Phil out of her life she had given herself back, body and soul, to her father and to the old life. She had burnt her boats. And not only the once in London, but again—and more irretrievably still—in Vienna.

The picture of the past had risen before her like a vision that came and went in a flash. Already, with a coarse laugh, Paul had dissipated it and re-conjured the present.

"I dare say," he was saying placidly, "that I am hurting you a bit by telling you all this. But you're a sensible girl, and you'll soon get over it. It isn't a shame for a woman to be led by the nose by a man, and old Bill, he is a plausible rascal with women when he likes. Just that quiet way of his, you know, and the things he says. And he was always mighty fond of you, was old Bill. Well, we arranged the whole thing in London before we started. You and Bill and Kilts was to follow on, and I was always to give you the slip. It all worked very well. Bill and Kilts they just stuffed you up with their tales and you took to the bait like a fish. And so we all came to Russia. Me and the Princess twenty-four hours ahead of you. But, of course, there was always the danger of your finding things out too soon. You couldn't do nothing for the Princess; she was in Russia, and that was all right so far. But if you two women got together and got talking, and the Bobrinsky woman found out a day too soon that her husband was dead, and that she'd been led by the

nose too, why then she might, just out of sheer obstinacy, refuse to disgorge the jewels. People of her sort are like that, you know, kid. Over a thing like that they'll just go as obstinate as mules. I've seen dozens of 'em marched off to Siberia, when, just by giving up something that p'r'aps would never be any use to them any more—papers or jewels or such like—they might have saved themselves You and I, kid, who've never pretended to be swells, don't understand that sort of thing, do we?"

He threw away one cigarette and lighted another, looking, over the flame of the match, at the soft pink colour that had spread over Litta's face when he said "you and I." She had closed her eyes, and a curious shudder seemed to have crept up her spine "You and I." Paul Sergine seemed to have acquired a sudden knack of speaking the truth He was quite right. She had become one of them now. Their associate, their pal, as she had been in the past. She had burnt her boats. There was no going back.

"You and I! O my God!"

"Now, you being the sensible girl that you are," Paul Sergine resumed after he had smoked in silence for a minute or two, "you'll understand that though there'd have been some satisfaction in seeing the Bobrinsky woman strung up or sent to Siberia if she refused to disgorge the jewels, it wouldn't have been much good to any of us in the long run. So the thing was not to let you two women get together too soon. Now do you see?"

"I think I do," Litta replied slowly.

"So what did they all do—the pals, I mean—

but get the Bobrinsky right away from here, where the merest chance might at any moment have brought you and her together. Understand?"

"I do understand. Then where did you and your pals send her?"

"That's just what I can't tell you, kid."

"Because you don't know?"

"Because I am not at liberty to say."

"Why not?"

"I told you. We all promised"

Litta gave a quick sigh of relief. If it was merely a question of promises—— What did promises mean to these liars? She gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"Oh, promises!" she said with a harsh little laugh

"We never do the dirty on one another," Paul retorted, and fixed his dark, almond-shaped eyes on her, always with that appraising look which irritated her. Something of the intense contempt which she felt for the man must have shown in her answering look, because, just for the space of a few seconds, the perfect impassiveness of his Mongol features gave place to a quick flash that seemed like a gleam of fire shot out of smouldering ashes.

"And yet you are on the point of doing it now," Litta said coldly.

"What d'you mean?"

"You are on the point of proposing some kind of dirty bargain with me, for getting behind the back of your precious associates"

"What makes you say that?"

"The locked door, for one thing."

Paul laughed. "Well," he said coolly, "perhaps you're right. But I'm not going to propose any dirty bargain, as you call it. I am just going to say to you this: come with me, and I'll take you straightaway to your friend. Now, then, is that straight?"

He had risen from his chair and pushed it away from him. Then he came swaggering up to her, looked down on her, the top of her jaunty little hat, the chestnut curls that peeped out from under the brim like tiny, fluffy golden clouds, her delicate hands resting in her lap. They were quite steady, those hands, and her eyes, as she raised them, looked quite straight into his. She neither flushed nor moved, not even when the glow of passionate desire lit up his queer, almond-shaped eyes and distorted his impassive face So still and silent was she, so inscrutable the look in her deep blue eyes, that he thought perhaps she had not grasped his meaning.

"We'd go and pick the woman up first," he went on, "because I know that's what you're hankering after, and we'll see her safe across the frontier. You do want to see her safe across the frontier, don't you, kid?"

"Yes," she replied, slowly nodding her head. "I do."

"Well, you shall And when you two women have got together and talked things over, we'll see if we can persuade her to share up some of her precious jewellery with us. She might be inclined to do it for you, kid, though she wouldn't, I dare say, do it under threats from anybody. But if she don't, it won't matter. You've got plenty of money

of your own, haven't you? That would do to begin with. And, bless you, I can get plenty. Thousands. Any time. I know of another international organisation almost as good as ours. They've tried to get me to join them before now, and if I do go over, I can work it up, till it gets to be the biggest in the world. I've got some connections in Argentina that'll be an eye-opener to you. Money? I'll make you swim in money, kid. As for pearls and jewels, I'll give you finer ones than the Bobrinsky woman ever had stored away. I'll——"

Had Litta really listened all this while? Did that abominable wretch really dare to speak those words which had struck her consciousness like slaps on the face to a man who is half dazed? She had heard words very much like these before. From André de Malsabre. Coarse, half-educated, semi-savage, this Paul Sergine was in no way more corrupt than the high-bred man of the world. Beast! What beasts men were! And she had wilfully delivered herself into the hands of these gaol-birds, these liars! And this beast went on talking. Talking. Drawing pictures that were loathsome to contemplate. And edging closer and closer to her, with a leer on his ugly, Chinese face, and a gloating look in his small, flat eyes. His breath was hot and reeked of alcohol, his coarse, spatulated finger-tips stained with nicotine. Loathsome! Hideous! Horrible! Litta for one second had to close her eyes, feeling physically sick.

For one second. When she re-opened them they fastened on a tumbler still half-filled with wine. On a sudden impulse she seized it and dashed it in

the brute's face. He had instinctively raised his arm to ward off the blow, and the glass fell with a clatter to the floor; but not before it hit him on the forehead, and the wine streamed all down his face. He gave a hoarse cry of rage, and for a few seconds was helpless, while Litta with a bound ran to the window and feverishly fumbled with the latch. In a moment it yielded, but unfortunately not soon enough. While she was pulling the window open, the Russian was already by her side. Gone was the mellifluous tone of his voice, gone the amorous glance of his eyes. The tyrannical temperament of the Slav was up in arms against this woman—a woman—daring to thwart and to defy him. In the fierceness of his rage he was blind to every danger and to every consequence. He seized Litta by the wrist and drew her roughly away from the window She gave one scream. More she could not do, although when first the latch had yielded she had caught one glimpse, like a flash, of a figure—a man's figure, she thought—hovering out there in the garden. The man from Santa Rosa perhaps. Oh! if it should be the man from Santa Rosa! And if he should hear that one desperate scream for help. More she could not do. That horrible hand, all stained with nicotine, was clapped to her mouth And her arm was forced behind her back, till she felt that her shoulder would break

"You little vixen!" the man muttered through his teeth.

She was young, and as tough as a young filly, and she fought while she could. But the contest was desperately unequal. A brute beast in a rage

—a tyrant thwarted. What chance had she? She felt sick and weak. Not frightened. Not really, really frightened, but miserably sick and conscious of the futility of her struggles. Already she ached all over; her little hat had fallen off her head, her chestnut curls were all dishevelled and clung matted against her moist temples. Before her eyes there was a mist through which she saw that hideous Chinese face with the yellow parchment skin and the flat, dark eyes, that glowed with a flame akin to madness. And to her nostrils there came that odious breath, hot and poisonous like that of a wolf, hungering for its prey. The next moment would have seen her conquered, broken. O God in Heaven, have mercy .

Then it seemed as if a tornado swept across the room. The window flew open with a crash, the cold north-easterly wind came tearing in, in the wake of a huge, dark figure that threw itself upon the Russian, caught him by the throat and shoulder and hurled him to the ground. Litta, suddenly freed, lost her balance; giddy and sick she fell up against the table, and remained there, standing, clinging to its edge, like one deprived of sight. What had happened she did not know. A ruddy mist obscured the room. Her hair hung dishevelled over her brow, obstructing her view. With a mechanical gesture she swept it away from her eyes, and tried to peer through the cloud of dust that enveloped a shapeless mass of humanity struggling on the floor. Struggling for life in deadly silence Litta had seen men fight before—in those olden days in the squalor of Pierson Street, on Saturday nights after the public-houses

had closed. But she had never seen men fight like this. Hand to hand, body against body, arms and legs intertwined in the deadly struggle for life Now one body on the top, and now the other. One man was supple as an eel, the other powerful as a beast of the desert in a rage. The faces she could not see. And all in absolute silence. Not a word Not an oath. Not an exclamation either of rage or of pain. Only the sound of stertorous breathing through two panting throats, while death stood waiting by.

Sick and giddy still, Litta staggered forward. She was regaining consciousness and could not—could not—stand there and see two men mad with the lust to kill She staggered forward, and through the cloud of dust she saw one man lying prone on the ground, his chin propped against the floor. One arm was doubled up under him, the other, held by the wrist as if in a vice, was being forced backwards by his opponent, who knelt on the top of him and with his other hand held him by the hair. Litta could see that head on the floor being dragged back and back, the chin raised gradually away from its support against the floor. And the face that appeared to her thus, pulled back by the crop of black hair, the parchment skin, tight like that of a drum, the eyes starting out of their sockets, the lips parted in a last effort for breath, the muscles of the neck taut like cords, was that of Paul Sergine. And above him was a face with brown hair dishevelled, eyes glowing with uncontrolled fury, nostrils dilated, mouth hard and set, a week's growth of beard on the chin. The justiciary on the point of dealing death to that

brute who had no longer the strength to cry for mercy.

"Phil!"

The cry was one of joy as well as of horror, of relief, of pain, of warning. It was a cry that had in it the whole gamut of a woman's primitive emotions, the entire scale of a woman's passions. But it was a cry that for the moment caused the man to look up at the woman—his woman, who in that one cry had told him just what his presence meant to her—to look up and for that one instant to relax his hold, which in the next second perhaps would have meant death to his opponent. That instant was enough. It always is enough in a struggle for life. More supple than an eel, the Russian had freed himself from that terrible weight that had borne him down. A turn, a twist of his lithe Oriental body, and he had his arms free and his fist shot out and caught Philip Chartley straight between the eyes. An instant. A second. A flash What is that but an incident in a hand-to-hand fight? The blow dealt by a man already weakened by an unequal combat was as nothing to one of such powerful physique as Philip Chartley, and another minute or less would have seen the fight resumed with fewer chances than even before in favour of the Russian. The whole thing was only a matter of a couple of seconds, but those seconds did in fact change the whole aspect of this struggle for life or death. Paul Sergine with another twist of the body was once more on his feet. With one bound he was near the table and close to Litta. Litta he seized by the wrist; from the table he

picked up a knife, and, holding it against her bare throat, he shouted in a hoarse, broken voice:

"Hands up, or she's a dead woman!"

Though with the words he had brought Philip Chartley to a halt, he cried out once more: "Hands up!" and Litta felt the sharp point of the knife-blade pricking her throat; and a tiny drop of blood trickled down her chest, staining the whiteness of her skin Phil gave a raucous cry like a desert beast baulked in its fury.

"Now then," Paul Sergine went on more coolly, "whoever you are, damn you, if you move as much as an eyelid, she's a dead woman!"

And after that silence. These three human creatures stood there, looking at one another, motionless, silent, like figures carved in stone. The three of them, the woman and the two men. She with her wrist held as if in a vice, the pointed knife-blade scratching her throat; Paul Sergine with head thrown back, his Chinese eyes fixed upon the man, whose identity was probably slowly dawning upon him; and Philip Chartley, with slender hands tightly clenched, his soul tortured with the impotence thrust upon him, gazing with awe-stricken eyes on those tiny drops of blood that trickled down slowly from Litta's throat. And around them hung clouds of dust through which a number of flies were darting, their buzzing being the only sound that broke this silence—as absolute as the grave.

TIME stood still.

For one minute, or was it two? It might continue to stand still for all eternity as far as Phil and Litta were concerned. Neither of them would have dared to move. Paul Sergine was quickly regaining his swagger. With a nod of the head he indicated the window.

"You can go away when you like, you know," he said to Philip Chartley, "and by the way you came. But hands up, or——"

And he gave a sharp, significant laugh.

Philip did not move. Nor did Litta Time was standing still.

And suddenly the death-like silence was broken by a deafening report, white smoke fought for a moment against the cloud of dust, a smell of powder was in the air, and Paul Sergine, with no more than the birth of a raucous cry, threw out his arms, gave a half-turn of the body, staggered forward, turned again, and finally fell headlong on the floor.

"I got the brute proper, didn't I, kid?"

It was Bill's voice. The next moment one of his powerful legs was over the window-sill, and the other followed soon after. As he came farther into the room, he was coolly thrusting the small automatic back into the hip-pocket of his trousers.

Litta, with the woman's instinct to seek shelter in the arms of her mate, had run across

to Phil and was clinging to him in pathetic helplessness For one moment Bill's eyes rested on her. He could only see the back of her head with the golden curls all tousled; her face was buried in the folds of her husband's coat. Just for the space of one second it seemed as if he was going to say something, and a flame of dark resentment shot through his eyes. But he swallowed hard, and quietly walked across to the wounded man. He looked down on him, mutely, for a few seconds, while Philip gently loosened Litta's arms from round his neck and instinctively went down on one knee beside the prone figure, trying to recollect the first-aid lessons he had learned out at the front during the war.

"Let's get him into another room," he said, "and I'll see if I can find some sort of doctor in the village, while you——"

"Oh! he ain't dead," Bill broke in curtly. "Scum such as that aren't killed so easily Don't you waste your time on him, my lord You've only just got time to get the kid out of this."

Philip frowned. He didn't quite understand.

"Get Litta out of this?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"I left the others at the village inn," Bill rejoined slowly "All of 'em drunk and jawing their heads off. I just wanted to see that the kid was all right Lucky I did, wasn't it? I heard the infernal din you was making when I come through the garden; then when I tried the door I found it locked. I came round to the window, see? Lucky I had that little thing by me. I was always a good shot, wasn't I, kid? But the brute

ain't dead. I'll see to him. Don't you fret. You just get away."

"But I am not going to leave you here, man, to stand the racket," Phil exclaimed.

"There ain't going to be no racket. See? Me and Kilts and all these Russians are pals, and it ain't the first time there's been a bit of shooting. Why, the woman here even didn't take a bit of notice. Don't be a fool," he said with a sudden access of fierceness; "you've got to think of the kid, haven't you?"

"I'm going to fetch a doctor to this man first."

"No, you ain't," Bill retorted with a savage oath. "I'm going to do that. I tell you he ain't dead, and me and Kilts are pals with this commissar here. We won't come to no harm, I promise you, even if this scum dies, which he won't, worse luck! But if you waste any more time, you'll have the kid dragged into this. And I won't have her dragged into any mess here. See? I'd sooner turn that little automatic on her now."

"If there is danger for her, "Phil retorted obstinately, "there's danger for you, and——"

"And are we a pack of goddam women, my lord, or are we men? Is it your wife you've sworn to protect, or is it me? I can look after myself, curse you! but you just look at her!"

The eyes of the two men rested for one moment on the pathetic figure of the kid, who, still dazed with the horrors which she had witnessed and the terrible crisis through which she had passed, was leaning against the white-washed wall, her face the colour of ashes, her throat still stained with

blood, her eyes, dark and circled, fixed upon the one man in the world whom she could trust and whom she had learned to love. With a hand that trembled slightly she was holding a tiny handkerchief to her wounded throat. Indeed, she looked so forlorn and in her helplessness so pathetic, that Phil's opposition to Bill's commands vanished at sight of her. He must instinctively have called to her with a look, because the next moment she was once more in his arms, clinging to him, whilst tears of relief trickled slowly down her cheeks.

"Take me away, Phil," she murmured. "I can't bear much more." Impossible to hesitate after that

"Can you bear to run to your room," Phil asked her, "and get your passport, while I find out from your father what chances we have of getting away?"

She nodded in reply, and reluctantly disengaged herself from his arms. She was just on the point of turning from him, when a thought struck her, and her lips murmured the one word:

"Gabrielle!"

Bill was down on one knee coolly turning out the pockets of the wounded man. It seemed as if, once he had succeeded in bringing Phil round to his way of thinking, he deliberately turned his back on him and the kid Phil bent his head until his mouth was on a level with Litta's ear.

"If I give you my word that she is safe, and out of Russia, will you believe me?"

She nodded All men were beasts. All men were liars save this one. Litta had lost faith in

half the world, but gained it in the one thing that mattered.

"Does she know?" she asked softly.

"I had to tell her. She would never have left Russia if she thought that her husband lived."

Bill suddenly rose and turned to them with a key lying in the palm of his hand.

"Here's the key," he said roughly. "Go on, kid, and get your passport."

He watched her until she was out of the room, and many seconds after that he still stood, watching the door through which she had gone. The glow of dull resentment was still in his eyes, and his coarse, cruel lips were pressed tightly together.

"Shall we carry him into the next room?" Phil asked presently.

Bill gave a start; he seemed to wake up from a dream. He nodded assent, and bending to their task the two men carried the inert body into the next room, which proved to be a bedroom, probably the one which had been occupied by Paul Sergine. They laid the body on the bed.

"He's dead," Philip Chartley said curtly.

Bill nodded "I guess he is," he said "But the kid needn't know."

He turned away from the bed with a shrug of indifference. Phil put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Will you allow me," he said simply, "to shake you by the hand?"

"Shake me by the hand?" Bill retorted with a savage snarl. "What for?"

"Because whatever you may have done in the

past, what you are doing to-day is redeeming it all."

Bill shook off the hand roughly from his shoulder.

"I ain't doing anything to-day," he said curtly, "more than any other day."

"You are right there, man," Philip Chartley retorted simply; "for you have loved Litta all the days of her life. Won't you shake hands?" he added, holding out his hand and looking down at the face of the ex-convict with a winning smile.

"No!" Bill replied curtly, and stalked out of the room.

The Celestial City XXXIV

Litta had not yet come down. Bill's eyes, still alight with that glow of dull resentment, searched the room for her. Then deliberately he picked up a couple of cushions from the sofa by the hearth and threw them on the floor, there where a large dark stain showed upon the carpet.

"She won't have time to notice," Sir Philip remarked in answer to the older man's thoughts. "We'll have to get to the station as quickly as we can."

"You won't have to go to this station," Bill rejoined drily. "I've got the commissar's car here and I'll drive you as far as Koursk There's plenty of time for you an' the kid to catch the afternoon express from there back to Warsaw. It's the train Kilts and I were goin' to catch to-morrow.

The kid's passport is all in order, of course. Kilts saw to that before we left London. I suppose," he added, "yours is all right, too."

"Yes. I have one that precious commissar himself made out for me yesterday. It has my photograph on it, but it is in the name of Serge Danieff, native of Bulgaria."

"Then it's all in order. I don't know how you wangled it out of Stanko. With the help of palm-grease, I suppose."

Sir Philip nodded, smiling even now at the recollection of his interview with the redoubtable people's commissar.

"If Stanko gave you the passport himself," Bill went on, "then it's in order"

"I know it's in order," Sir Philip rejoined. "I had occasion to use it yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"As far as Kharkoff. I went as far as there, you know, with the Princess Bobrinsky."

"You went as far as there with Princess Bobrinsky?" Bill reiterated mechanically. "You did, did you? Yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Where did you meet her, then?"

"At the village inn. It is kept, I think, by one of your friends, Jakob Grossman by name."

"That's right," Bill rejoined, slowly nodding his head. "So that's where she was all the time?"

"I don't know about all the time. She certainly was there yesterday."

"How did you know that?"

"Well, I knew she was coming to Ostolga. I knew the history of the jewels."

"How did you know that?"

"I overheard the Princess Bobrinsky telling Litta all about them, and the supposed letter from her husband, in my house in the South of France."

"So you followed the Princess all the way to this goddam place?"

"Not so much the Princess—it was my wife I followed"

"She came with me—of her own free will."

"I know that."

"And in Vienna she told you so pretty plainly, didn't she?"

"She told me—yes."

"And still you followed her?"

"As you see."

"Why?"

"Because I put two and two together. I guessed that you had struck some sort of bargain with her."

"And that it had something to do with this blasted Princess?"

"I was right, wasn't I?"

"So you figured it out that if you got the Princess safe, the kid would turn her back on her old father and come to you?"

"Put it that way, if you like"

"Yes, I'm going to put it that way," Bill retorted, with a savage oath "And d'you know why I'm putting it that way? Because I want you to know just how much I hate you And, by gosh! I hate you enough to kill you just where you stand."

"I suppose you do," Sir Philip rejoined quietly.

Bill gave a harsh laugh and shrugged his massive shoulders.

"It'd be satisfaction for me to kill you," he said, "for you've stole the kid's love from me. But for you, she'd have——"

He broke off abruptly, and threw a glance full of glowering hatred on the man who had stolen the kid's love from him. Then, just as abruptly his whole manner changed. He drew his cigar-case from his pocket, carefully selected a cigar, even offered one to Sir Philip. He struck a match with a perfectly steady hand and deliberately lit the cigar.

"I'd be glad to know," he said quite calmly, "how you got the Princess away."

"Through the window of the inn," Sir Philip replied, with a smile.

"How did you know she was there?"

"I knew she'd have to come to the commissar's office some time or other. I saw her there. There is only one inn in the village, and she was bound to go there, too. I watched for her under cover of the darkness. Presently she opened a small window up in the attic and I saw her. I had my message wrapped round a stone ready to throw to her, and I knew that she would be plucky enough to do what I asked, which was to remain perfectly still while I climbed up to her window. She was wonderfully brave, because I had to tell her the whole truth then and there in that horrible attic, all infested with vermin, and with the voices of all those brutes coming up to her ears from

the room below. It took me the best part of an hour to persuade her, to make her understand the truth and believe it, poor thing. But at last she realised the truth, and agreed to come away with me. We found a rope in the attic fortunately, and the window was not more than twenty feet from the ground. We got down and got to the station in time for the slow train to Kharkoff. I had the passports and permits which, by dint of palm-grease and a bit of luck, I had wrested from the commissar, so we had no difficulty about travelling and got to Kharkoff an hour before midnight. The manager of the Scandinavian bank there is Princess Bobrinsky's great friend. Fortunately, neither he nor his wife had gone to bed yet. They received the Princess with the greatest care and affection, and Mr. de Klingspor himself is escorting her to-day as far as Odessa, where he will see her on board a Swedish ship there which is bound for Salonika She will be quite all right, because as a matter of fact she has got her own passport and permit, which by the most extraordinary stroke of good fortune I picked up myself from the commissar's table yesterday. This Mr. de Klingspor, too, is a very influential man, and the Russian authorities are always careful not to quarrel with the Swedes"

Sir Philip Chartley had long finished speaking, but Bill had not attempted to say anything in reply. He puffed away in silence at his cigar. Perhaps in the depths of that guilty nature something that was not altogether vile had stirred at this simple recital of what had been in fact heroic self-denial and marvellous presence of mind, and

had grudgingly admitted that the man who could do so much and risk so much for a friend was a worthy guardian and mate for the kid.

A patter of high-heeled shoes on the wooden staircase roused the two men out of their dreams.

"If you're ever unkind to the kid——" Bill began.

"Don't be a fool, man!" Phil retorted roughly.

"I know! I know! But you men who call yourselves gentlemen do get queer sometimes. All I mean is that, though I shan't be there to see it, my ghost'd haunt you if you did treat her rough."

Philip frowned, questioning: "What do you mean by your ghost? You told me that you were in no danger from your pals."

"No more I am," Bill rejoined with a harsh laugh. "Me and my pals understand one another, see? But I did tell you also, didn't I, my lord," he went on with a fierce oath, "that if you don't take the kid away, and quickly, and do as I tell you, you'll have her dragged into the mess, and that sooner than that should happen I'd turn my little automatic on her now?"

Before Philip could say another word the patter of high-heeled shoes was outside the door and the next moment Litta came into the room She had her handbag on her arm and her two little hands were clasping her precious passport. She paused for a second or two at the door, her deep blue eyes still expressing something of the horror which they had witnessed in this room a few short minutes ago. When she realised that there was

no one here now only Phil and her father, a look of relief spread all over her face. But her first thought was towards Phil.

"I've got everything," she said rather breathlessly "Can we go now?"

Phil made no reply for a moment. Hesitating, his eyes searched the ex-convict's face. Bill, divining his thoughts, nodded slowly in response.

"Yes, that's all right," he said. "I've got the car just outside there. We'll be in Koursk in twenty minutes, and the train doesn't go till five-something."

He paused, and the look of dull resentment once more crept into his eyes. With a muttered curse he flung his cigar into the fire He had caught the kid's eyes fixed, puzzled and questioning, upon him, whilst her hand clung to her husband's arm as if for protection.

"You'll be all right, kid," he muttered curtly. "Nobody'll know till to-morrow morning but that you are still in your room. And by the morning you'll be the other side of this damnable Russia."

"But what about you, father?" Litta asked. "Aren't you coming away with us?"

"Not me," Bill retorted gruffly. "I ain't through with my business here yet"

"But surely——" she began.

Almost like a savage beast Bill turned on her, snarling.

"Now, don't start arguing," he said roughly. "I know my own business, don't I? Yours is to get out of this as quick as you can They are all jawing their heads off over at the local pub,

and most of 'em are drunk. But at any moment one of 'em might take it into his drunken pate to come back here, and then where'll all of us be?"

Without another word he strode out of the room, and Philip and Litta followed in silence. The house seemed extraordinarily still with the obese and melancholy Natalia possibly dozing in her kitchen and Paul Sergine lying rigid in the bed with inscrutable Chinese eyes staring lifeless into eternity.

The Celestial City XXXV

WHEN the Warsaw-Vienna-Paris express steamed at last out of Koursk station, Bill turned on his heel and went slowly back to the car. It was very cold, but Bill didn't seem to feel it. While the few idlers in and about the station stamped their feet and swung their arms to keep themselves warm, he busied himself unconcernedly with re-starting the car.

It was close on seven before he was back in Ostolga and turned the car into the shed which Jakob Grossman was pleased to call the garage.

Bill had not been guilty of exaggeration when he told Sir Philip that most of his friends congregated in the isba were drunk at this hour. They were all more or less drunk; the only one who seemed at all to have kept his head was Peter Abramovitch Stanko. But even he was blear-eyed, and the face which he turned to the door when Bill entered the room was red and blotchy.

"Hello!" he called in a thick, raucous voice. "Here you're at last! What a time you've been!"

Bill, without a word, took his seat at the table amongst the others, but he declined the glass of neat brandy which Peter Abramovitch had pushed towards him.

"What!" the people's commissar exclaimed with a hoarse voice. "Ain't you drinking? What's the matter with you?"

Bill, still silent, only shrugged his shoulders. He had caught a quick glance from Kilts. This glance had conveyed a hint to him to be cautious. Kilts evidently was not so drunk as he appeared to be, and for some reason or other feigned helplessness whilst he was obviously very much on the alert

"Well, how's that girl of yours, comrade Bill?" the commissar queried jovially.

"Quite all right," Bill replied curtly. "She's gone to bed."

"Gone to bed, has she?" the commissar exclaimed. "Why? Is she ill?"

"No. Only tired. She's only a kid and it's been a long journey She'll be all right tomorrow."

The commissar offered no further remark. Jakob Grossman and the others were still engaged in their eternal Tarok, but obviously the game had degenerated into a gamble for points, not one of the players being in a condition to play his cards intelligently. Unostentatiously, and under the pretext of getting a closer view of the game, Bill came round the table and sat down next to Kilts.

"I've an idea these blighters are goin' to do the dirty on us somehow," Kilts contrived to whisper in his friend's ear. It was impossible to say more for the moment, because the bleared eyes of Peter Abramovitch Stanko rested with a curious expression upon the two foreigners. But anyway, Bill appeared indifferent. With a shrug of the shoulders he tried to convey to Kilts's mind the fact that he didn't care.

Jakob Grossman, on the other hand, appeared dejected. For one thing, he was losing at Tarok, which always depressed him, and then he was not altogether satisfied as to what Peter Abramovitch and Paul Sergine had planned with regard to the business of the Bobrinsky jewels. The Bobrinsky woman had not yet been traced—that much he knew; also that the foreigners had been told that she and Paul had not yet arrived, and that they would no doubt come by the train to-morrow. But he, Grossman, was a man of caution. He was well aware that any bit of mischance might bring either comrade Kilts or comrade Bill face to face with Paul. He also knew that as the Bobrinsky woman had not yet been traced, there was the possibility that she never would be. What arrangements the commissar and Paul had made for getting rid of the foreigners if the jewels were ever found he neither knew nor cared, but he was beginning to be in very grave doubt whether he would ever set eyes on those jewels.

Peter Abramovitch had done his best to reassure him and his comrades that everything would turn out all right in the end, that the Bobrinsky woman would be traced and brought back and made to

give up the jewels, and that the foreigners would not share in the spoils, because some railway or road accident would sweep them comfortably out of the way; but Jakob Grossman and his friend Aaron Mosenthal had refused to be comforted. They were anxious and they were suspicious. Dolefully they continued to play, throwing down their cards with listless, dispirited gestures.

"Why didn't you contra that ultimo?" Peter Abramovitch asked at the conclusion of a game which Grossman had played with obvious heedlessness.

"I didn't think," Jakob murmured, blinking his sienna-coloured eyes and meditatively sipping a glass of green Chartreuse.

The cards were dealt again. The cabalistic words so dear to Tarok-players fell dully on Bill's ears. He lit a Havana, and smoking in silence he watched the game, unseeing, that look of dull resentment still lingering in his eyes, his thoughts following the course of the train that bore the kid away out of his life—for ever. Rub-a-dubb-dubb! Rub-a-dubb-dubb! He could almost hear the rumble of the wheels—almost feel the weight of them upon his heart.

Aaron Mosenthal had just brought off a successful "Vies Konige" when there was a commotion outside the door. A woman shrieking at the top of her voice, other voices shouting or mingling in a kind of dull murmur. The men round the table paid no heed to the commotion at first. Disturbances? Women shrieking? These were matters of constant occurrence in these days of the millennium in Russia. But presently there

was a pounding at the door, and the woman shrieked louder, demanding admittance.

"The commissar!" she shouted. "Where is the commissar?" Peter Abramovitch lifted an eyebrow and muttered half to himself. "It's that fool Natalia. I wonder what she wants."

But already Jakob Grossman had shuffled to the door and drawn the bolts. Somehow Natalia's shrieks seemed to make all his fears and suspicions more tangible.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

But Natalia swept past him, her huge body rocking with excitement. She was followed by two men who represented what there was of law and order in the village of Ostolga. They helped Grossman to keep most of the crowd outside the door, but despite their efforts a score or so—men and women who had collected round Natalia when first she ran screaming through the village—pushed their way into the room in her wake

Peter Abramovitch pulled himself together, tried to sit straight up in his chair and to assume a dignity which half a bottle of neat French brandy had seriously jeopardised. He fixed the woman with a drunken stare.

"What do you want?" he asked

"Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine!" she gasped.

"What about him?"

"He's been murdered!"

"What?"

All the men jumped to their feet, the commissar himself and Aaron Mosenthal, the man from the Moscow Theatre, and Kilts. Only Bill remained seated, silently smoking, to all appearances

unmoved. For the next few minutes everyone talked at once, the women shrieking and lamenting, the men uttering curses. Peter Abramovitch, suddenly sobered, held Natalia by the wrist, forcing her to tell him as coherently as she could all that she knew. This was little enough. A quarter of an hour ago she had got some supper ready for Paul Alexandrovitch. Then she thought she would go to his room and see if he would come and eat it. He was stretched out full length on the bed; she thought he was asleep, but when she came near him she could see that he was dead His clothes were stained all down one side. Terrified she had run out of the room, only to catch her feet in the sofa cushions which were on the floor in the dining-room. She had fallen headlong and dislodged the cushions as she fell. Then she saw the carpet beneath them with a large dark stain on it. That's all she knew. Most of the afternoon she had been busy in her kitchen At one time certainly she had heard what she thought sounded like a quarrel or a fight. Then there was a report like a pistol-shot, but she had paid no attention. There were often quarrels in the house, as the commissar well knew.

"Then Paul had arrived after all!"

This was an exclamation from Kilts, who was as bewildered as any of the others with this tale of murder and of Paul "What the hell does it all mean?"

The commissar turned to him and looked him and Bill up and down Chance—or something more tangible perhaps—had, it seems, taken the matter in hand, and had shown the way to a very

simple means of getting rid of two irksome foreigners.

"It means," he retorted coolly, and with all the impressive dignity pertaining to his office as people's commissar for the district—"it means that you two have murdered our comrade Paul Alexandrovitch Sergine, and that you will hang for it to-morrow morning, both of you, or my name is not Peter Abramovitch Stanko. Comrades," he added, speaking to the gendarmes—men in tattered khaki tunics, off-shoots of the Red Army—"have you some rope handy?"

Kilts fought like a demon. He had his automatic in his hip-pocket and had two shots at the commissar, shattering the man's jaw. But Bill remained unmoved throughout, while the men in the tattered tunics pinioned his arms behind his back.

"Don't be a fool, Kilts," was all he said. "Our number is up, anyway."